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# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **DISSERTATION**

**NO RETREAT:  
THE FAILURE OF SOVIET DECISION-MAKING IN THE  
AFGHAN WAR, 1979–1989**

by

Michael R. Fenzel

September 2013

Dissertation Supervisor:

Daniel Moran

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**NO RETREAT:  
THE FAILURE OF SOVIET DECISION-MAKING IN THE AFGHAN  
WAR, 1979–1989**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN SECURITY STUDIES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to settle a quarrel among competing factions within the recently installed communist government, and to suppress the anti-communist resistance that the Afghan government's ideology and conduct had inspired among the population. This dissertation examines the Soviet decision-making surrounding what proved to be a decade-long military effort. It focuses on the way political decision-making at the highest levels of the Soviet state shaped the war's origins, conduct and outcome, with particular attention on the politics and inner workings of the Politburo, the most senior collective decision-making body in the government. Like most wars, the outcome of the Soviet-Afghan War appears over determined in retrospect. There is no claim here that the Soviet defeat can be attributed to their having missed some readily apparent path to victory, nor a claim that the Afghan war would have been won but for mistakes made in Moscow. Yet it remains true that the senior leadership of the Soviet Union quickly became aware that their strategy was unraveling, that their operational and tactical methods were not working, and that the sacrifices they were demanding from the Soviet people and military were unlikely to produce the results they hoped for. They persisted nonetheless. This study explains why and how that happened, as viewed from the center of the Soviet state. From that perspective, three sources of failure stand out: poor civil-military relations; repeated and often rapid turnover at the very summit of Soviet leadership; and the perception among Politburo members that Soviet global prestige and influence were inexorably tied to the success of the Afghan mission, which caused them to persist in their pursuit of a policy long after it was clearly unobtainable.



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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ABM Treaty	The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CK Plenum	Event comprising all Communist Party of the Soviet Union members
CPSU	The Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CWIHP	Cold War International History Project
ESOC	Empirical Study of Conflict
GRU	The Main Soviet Intelligence Military Directorate
ISI	Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence
KGB	The Committee for State Security (Primary Soviet Intelligence Agency)
MALSE	Mining Afghan Lessons from the Soviet Era.
NSSD	National Security Decision Directive
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OPTEMPO	Soviet Operational Tempo
PDPA	Afghan Communist Party (Two Factions: Khalq and Parcham)
SALT I and SALT II	The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks I and II (1972 and 1979)
Spetznatz	Soviet Special Forces
UN	The United Nations
U.S.	The United States
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to settle a quarrel among competing factions within the recently installed communist government and to suppress the anti-communist resistance that the Afghan government's ideology and conduct had inspired among the population. This dissertation examines the Soviet decisions that led to the invasion, governed the conduct of the war, and contributed to its ultimate strategic failure. It focuses on the politics of the Politburo before and during the Afghan War (1978–1989), and on the way that political decision making at the highest levels of the Soviet state shaped the war's origins, conduct, and outcome.

Like most wars, the outcome of the Soviet-Afghan War appears over-determined in retrospect. There is no claim here that the Soviet defeat can be attributed to their having missed some readily apparent path to victory, nor a claim that the Afghan war would have been won but for mistakes made in Moscow. Yet it remains true that the senior leadership of the Soviet Union quickly became aware that their war plan/strategy was unraveling, that their operational and tactical methods were not working, and that the sacrifices they were demanding from the Soviet people and military were unlikely to produce the strategic results they hoped for. They persisted nonetheless. This dissertation seeks to explain why and how that happened.

### **A. THESIS**

Among the many reasons for the failure of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, three stand out at the center of the Soviet state: poor civil-military relations; repeated and often rapid turnover at the very summit of Soviet leadership; and the perception among Politburo members that Soviet global prestige and influence were inexorably tied to the success of the Afghan mission, which caused them to persist in their pursuit of a policy long after it was clearly unobtainable. It is worthwhile, by way of introducing the chapters to come, to say a few words about each of these.

## 1. Civil-Military Relations

Since its inception, military power was always a source of legitimacy for the Soviet Union. The Revolution had been near extinction at the hands of its White Army opponents and their foreign allies. It was only through Leon Trotsky's Red Army between October 1917 and October 1922 that the Revolution was able to succeed. First Lenin and then Stalin endeavored to logically define the parameters of Soviet military power in a political system where the military profession was of secondary importance. The Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) had catapulted the USSR into the first rank of world powers, while simultaneously displaying regime resilience and advertising the alleged superiority of communist ideology. Finally, the cold war requirement to retain a world class military with global reach as a condition of the USSR's great power status justified the many sacrifices that the Kremlin required of Soviet citizens. Simultaneously the urgency of the cold war masked the inefficiencies and corruption of the system behind an impenetrable wall of militarized patriotism. But if the Red Army was a source of regime strength, it was also a cause of political anxiety, lest the dictatorship of the proletariat be converted into a dictatorship of a more familiar stripe.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) had historically exercised close control over the nation's armed forces, most brutally through the purges of lingering and fateful memory enacted by Stalin from 1937, and more routinely through the insertion of civilian political commissars into the ranks of the uniformed military. The result was civilian supremacy and control of the military, no doubt, but purchased at the price of much suspicion and mutual recrimination among civilian and military leaders. As General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1964 until his death in 1982, Leonid Brezhnev sought to change this environment by substantially increasing military influence over national security decision making---in fact, the first decade of his tenure has been called the golden age of Soviet civil-military relations.<sup>1</sup> But this change did not last, as by mid-1970s the military's influence on policy began to diminish and, by 1979 as the situation in Afghanistan seemed to be spinning out of control, it was insignificant.

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson, eds., *Soldiers and the Soviet State: Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 25.

Understanding how and why this happened is integral to understanding the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent conduct of the war. Broadly speaking, the senior officer corps of the Soviet Union carried little weight in strategic decision making during this Soviet-Afghan War. It is worth considering what difference it might have made if the military voice had been more seriously considered.

## **2. Rapid Succession of Soviet Leadership**

During the first six years of the Afghan War, the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union changed hands four times. This persistent instability at the very top of the Soviet state reinforced the perhaps natural reluctance of the Politburo to contemplate withdrawal (and the attending requirement to admit policy failure), despite obvious signs that the war was not going well. Each of Brezhnev's successors needed time to secure his personal hold on power, and while doing so none was prepared immediately to abandon the war, including Gorbachev, General Secretary from 1985–1991, who had personally opposed it from the start. Whether greater stability at the top of the Soviet hierarchy would have made it easier to reach a decision to withdraw is impossible to say. But instability at the top of the Soviet hierarchy did mean that no leader felt secure enough to reverse an obviously failing policy.

## **3. Soviet Prestige and Reputational Risk**

By declaring that the continued success and stability of Communist states abroad was a high enough policy priority that it warranted military action, the Brezhnev Doctrine reaffirmed the international nature of the communist revolution in no uncertain terms. The situation in Afghanistan fell into this category, so that as a consequence, the Afghan War's success became a matter of preserving the international prestige of the Soviet Union. As the war dragged on inconclusively, the Politburo became increasingly concerned that if the USSR simply withdrew from Afghanistan and allowed its client government to fail, other communist nations would view Moscow as an undependable ally. In this way the Afghan War acquired a symbolic significance that overshadowed the more direct (but limited) interests the Soviets had in maintaining good order and friendly leadership in a neighboring state. It was only after the reputational risk of persisting in

Afghanistan came to be seen as more hazardous than withdrawal, that disengagement became politically feasible.

This dissertation analyzes the decisions made by the Soviet Politburo, which contributed to the failure of the Afghan mission, in light of these three general issues. The focus of this manuscript is not on the bureaucratic character of the decision-making process itself, but rather on its results: the concrete decisions that defined the USSR's Afghan policy and strategy throughout the conflict. Heretofore, most studies of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan have focused on poor Soviet tactics, the involvement of the United States in support of the insurgents, the general strength of the Afghan resistance, and the institutional and ideological fragility of the Kremlin's Afghan client state, as the basic causes for Soviet failure. While these aspects of the Soviet war are important, they are not the only reasons why the Soviet Union failed in Afghanistan. Utilizing the minutes of Politburo meetings from the period in question (1978–1989) as a basis for evaluating the interaction between key members of the Politburo over the issue of Afghanistan provides a critical perspective on how the Soviet-Afghan War began, how it was fought, and how and why it was ultimately lost. Analyzing the war by focusing on the interrelated issues of Soviet civil-military relations, leadership instability, and concerns about prestige sheds new light on how the Soviet Union failed. Such an approach to the Soviet war in Afghanistan has not been undertaken before.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This dissertation uses a research approach involving historical description and evaluation, based primarily upon declassified Politburo documents and the published recollections of former Soviet officials on actions in which they took part. In *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Alexander George and Andrew Bennett explore the risks of relying too exclusively on such material. They suggest that primary sources and declassified government documents are insufficient to answer questions about why and how governments act as they do. Such documents, they argue, do not speak for themselves, but can only be evaluated with reference to the broader context in which they were created. George and Bennett suggest that “assessing the

significance and evidentiary worth of such sources often requires a careful examination of other contemporary sources and secondary sources as an important part of contextual development.”<sup>2</sup> This dissertation uses secondary sources to contextualize the primary evidence generated by the Politburo itself. The aim here is indeed to see the war as it appeared from the center of the Soviet state; but that is not the only point of view that matters, and others must also be taken into account in order to present a clear picture of decisions and events.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2005), 210.



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## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE SOVIET FAILURE IN AFGHANISTAN**

Many scholars see the Soviet failure in Afghanistan as the inevitable result of any foray by a major power into this “graveyard of empires.”<sup>3</sup> Whatever difficulties waging war in Afghanistan might pose---and they are significant---the view that failure is inevitable is nevertheless a vast oversimplification. The argument of this thesis is that primary responsibility for Soviet failure begins at the center of power in Moscow. While a number of conditions in Afghanistan contributed to Soviet defeat, it is essential to take account of the decisions made by Soviet political leaders before and during the war. They had to deal with the weaknesses of the Afghan government and its military which had existed for decades before the war, and persisted through every stage of the conflict. Most in need of explanation is why Moscow persevered in a losing war for nearly ten years? The decision to remain in Afghanistan after achieving the initial objective of regime change in 1979 was made not by Soviet military leaders or diplomats, but by Leonid Brezhnev. Continued occupation was reaffirmed by subsequent General Secretaries until Mikhail Gorbachev finally ordered a withdrawal in February 1989. There is no current body of literature that explains this dimension of the Soviet failure. Instead, the best existing scholarly sources are focused on specific stages of the war, from initial intervention through the occupation and withdrawal. This dissertation makes the argument that Soviet failure at the political level was attributable to a civil-military divide, the rapid succession of leadership, and a persistent fear of damaging the USSR’s international reputation. It is a new approach based in part on new evidence presented in this dissertation.

Of the three general explanations of Soviet defeat in existing literature---Soviet military failure, Soviet diplomatic failure, and Afghan incapacity---Western scholars

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<sup>3</sup> General David H. Petraeus stated in 2009, “Afghanistan has been known over the years as the graveyard of empires. We cannot take that history lightly.” This suggests that the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan (Central Command specifically) saw the country’s history as a potential component to failure; Milton Bearden published his article entitled “Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires” in the 2001 Winter Issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 6 (Nov.–Dec., 2001), pp. 17–30, reminding the world of the failures of past powers in their forays into the country.

commonly conclude that the Soviet military's failure weighed the most heavily, because much of the available information is about military operations. Three sources---Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars*; Mark Galeotti's *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*; and Robert Gates' *From the Shadows*---provide exceptional detail and anecdotal information to suggest that Western coordination of international resources decisively contributed to the defeat of the Soviet military on the ground in Afghanistan. Galeotti suggests Soviet intervention was doomed from the start because of the "the cost of supporting such a huge and seemingly useless army."<sup>4</sup> In fact, Coll quotes an American diplomat who proclaims "We Won" in a cable from Islamabad and mentions that the CIA Director hosted a champagne party to celebrate the "victory."<sup>5</sup> Gates also trumpets the effort of the international clandestine coalition led by the United States as "a great victory."<sup>6</sup> Much of this reflects a U.S. view that Afghanistan was payback for Soviet support of the communists in Vietnam operating against the U.S.-sponsored Government of the Republic of Vietnam between 1965 and 1975. But, the truth about who brought about the Soviet defeat is much different. Although some U.S. officials might like to present the Soviet defeat as Washington's doing, international support for the Afghan resistance by itself does not explain the Soviet defeat.

The contention that the war in Afghanistan was "Charlie Wilson's War"<sup>7</sup> and that Soviet failure was brought about by American support for the Afghan resistance is incorrect. While U.S. support of Afghan rebels that included equipment like Stinger missiles was tactically important, it did not directly impact the Soviet decision to withdraw. The fact that U.S. support for the resistance was barely discussed in Politburo meetings suggests that it had little impact on Soviet decision making. Furthermore,

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass & Co, Ltd., 1995), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 185.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 433.

<sup>7</sup> George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times* (New York: Grove Press, 2003). Crile's book is not a scholarly work but has nonetheless become part of the conventional wisdom about the Soviet War in Afghanistan. Crile himself states on page 484, "The decision (to withdraw) may well have already been taken in Moscow to end the Red Army's unhappy occupation...the Soviets might have moved to withdraw anyway in precisely the same time frame. But perhaps not." He was correct. The Soviets were not swayed to withdraw by any action taken by the United States.

withdrawal from Afghanistan as a policy option was discussed in the Politburo at least one year before U.S.-supplied Stinger missiles appeared in Afghanistan. Although American support for the rebellion was significant in that it increased the reputational risk for the Soviets, it was not a direct cause of the failure of Moscow's Afghan policy. While much of the literature tends to emphasize the importance of a growing international jihad against the USSR and the impact of Stinger missiles in checkmating the Soviet military in Afghanistan, the importance of these factors is exaggerated. At any point after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, they might simply have withdrawn and in so doing avoided the international opprobrium they later encountered. But the Politburo failed to act and the consequences of this grew with each passing year. The General Secretaries and Politburo members expected the military leaders in Afghanistan to deliver a tactical and operational victory in a strategic vacuum, and when it was not forthcoming, they became confounded and frustrated, while making little effort to understand the political and military realities on the ground.

The flawed Politburo reaction of merely telling its military to "try harder" simply increased the brutality of the campaign, which only made strategic success more elusive. Indeed, Soviet claims that their military never lost a battle in Afghanistan rang as hollow as similar assertions made by American Colonel Harry Summers about the U.S. military in Vietnam two decades earlier. On 13 November 1986, Chief of the General Staff of Soviet Armed Forces, Marshal Sergey Akhromeev, told the Politburo that ground seized by Soviet and Afghan troops simply could not be held because troop numbers were insufficient,<sup>8</sup> precisely because the Politburo limited the number of Soviet troops to 108,000. The problem, in this view, was not a failure of Soviet troops to perform. Instead, international support for the Afghan resistance provided them with means to continue the fight, after which point a disconnect emerged in understanding that although the Politburo had ordered the military to destroy the resistance, it provided too few troops to do so.

The second common theme in the literature is that the war was a Soviet diplomatic failure. Some proponents of this explanation rely upon their own experience

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<sup>8</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 06 November, 1986, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 25.

with the United Nations diplomatic process to end the Soviet-Afghan War. Others point to evidence that indicates the United States and its allies (Pakistan, Egypt, and China) were unwilling to allow any diplomatic resolution to develop. The latter argument suggests that the United States used the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as an opportunity to mire the Soviet Union in a protracted conflict that would damage the country in domestic and international terms. The primary sources supporting this argument include Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison in their first-hand account entitled *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*. Cordovez was the appointed mediator from the United Nations who began the diplomatic journey to end the war in 1982 and continued the struggle through Gorbachev's unilateral decision to withdraw troops. Cordovez states that "as early as 1983 there were serious probes for a way out that were rejected by an American leadership bent on exploiting Soviet discomfiture."<sup>9</sup> Cordovez and Harrison go on to explain that in 1985 Gorbachev immediately went about an "intensified pursuit" of a settlement.<sup>10</sup> This account stands out for its rich detail and first-hand description of dealings with Soviet leaders. Because the authors had no access to Politburo documents, however, this assessment of events is incomplete.

David Isby's *Russia's War in Afghanistan*, Edgar O'Ballance's *Afghan Wars: Battles in Hostile Land* and Don Oberdorfer's *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* each provide a more detached view of Soviet state behavior, but still blame the collapse in Afghanistan on the diplomatic interaction between the Soviet Union and the United States. They see the war as an extension of the Cold War and the result as failure on the part of the two countries to engage one another effectively over Afghanistan or other pressing diplomatic issues at the time (such as the Soviet shoot down of a Korean airliner, the Politburo's mistaken belief in 1983 that the United States planned to attack the Soviet Union, and the Reagan Administration's planned Star Wars missile defense program). These accounts suggest that what occurred on the ground was much less important than the engagement between these superpowers, an engagement that

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<sup>9</sup> Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

inevitably led to a drawn out conflict, which was primarily ideological rather than military in nature. O'Ballance brings Pakistan into the picture: "The Americans liked (Pakistan President) Zia's 'no compromise' stance against the Soviets and the Kabul government, and he became their main bulwark against Soviet expansion in southern Asia."<sup>11</sup> These three books also draw their conclusions from a deductive approach to deciphering Soviet behavior. Politburo documents confirm that Soviet leaders did not give diplomacy serious consideration until after Gorbachev had been in power long enough to consolidate his political base.

Barnett Rubin, in *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, levels as much blame for Soviet failure on their inability to understand and deal diplomatically with the post-invasion Afghan government as he does credit for the United States' support of the Afghan resistance. Rubin cites the limits of Soviet cultural understanding (and concern) that led to a lack of political leverage that ultimately led to failure. He states that "Soviet penetration of the Afghan state apparatus did not enable Moscow simply to issue orders that would be followed."<sup>12</sup> The Afghan government proved hapless and more willing to allow Soviet advisers to guide the functions of the state than interested in taking the lead. Soviet penetration simply had not given them the leverage they anticipated.

The third explanation for Soviet failure is general weakness on the part of their Afghan partners. One finds this explanation preeminent in the memoirs and biographies of former Soviet officials. The most compelling are the Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin's *In Confidence* and Mikhail Gorbachev's *Memoirs*. Also noteworthy is Zhores Medvedev's biographical work *Andropov*. These works provide the details of repeated engagement with Afghan officials both in Kabul and during their brief visits to Moscow. Each of these accounts discusses how their inept, hand-picked leader of Afghanistan, Babrak Karmal, continually proved unequal to the task of broadening the government of Afghanistan and effectively engaging the resistance.<sup>13</sup> The impression that emerges from these memoirs is that if only a stronger Afghan leader had emerged, then

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<sup>11</sup> Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars: Battles in a Hostile Land* (London: Brassey's, 1993), 190.

<sup>12</sup> Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 125.

<sup>13</sup> Babrak Karmal was the President of Afghanistan from immediately following the invasion in 1979 until he was replaced by Gorbachev in May 1986 with the Afghan National Intelligence Director Mohammad Najibullah.

Soviet fortunes would have somehow improved. Gorbachev finally replaced the incorrigible Karmal with the stronger and more efficient former director of the Afghan intelligence service Mohammad Najibullah in early summer 1986. But by this time the situation had deteriorated to the point that no leader could have rescued it.

In my view, the emphasis on Afghan weakness is more a rationalization for Soviet failure than it is an effective expression of what truly went wrong. For years, Soviet military and diplomatic advisers in Afghanistan were keenly aware of the significant shortcomings of the Afghan Army and government ministries. This endemic situation was well known by the Politburo, which saw intervention and security assistance as a remedy that could rebuild the state and the armed forces. Access to archival data from Politburo meetings clearly shows the hubris of Soviet leadership and points to Afghan weakness as a source of frustration over the course of the war. However, this weakness was also well known and understood in the Soviet government before the invasion.

#### **A. THE MALSE DOCUMENTS AND COLD WAR RETROSPECTIVES**

The three prevalent arguments for Soviet failure found in the literature can now be measured against information revealed in the Soviet Politburo archives, which form the centerpiece of this manuscript. These recently translated documents provide details of previously top-secret meetings of the Soviet leadership during the war years in Afghanistan. The Hoover Institution Soviet Archives are primary source documents henceforth referred to as the Mining Afghan Lessons from the Soviet Era (MALSE) research program of Stanford's Empirical Studies of Conflict (ESOC) Project. MALSE was the official name given to the repository of English translations of Politburo archives. These previously classified Politburo documents, coupled with interviews of former Soviet officials done for the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), clearly demonstrate that the most important decisions surrounding Soviet policy in Afghanistan

were made at the center of power.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Brezhnev and a narrow group of his advisers made the decision to intervene. The new evidence suggests that Soviet policy in Afghanistan was often more driven by fear than by strategic calculation. As well, the MALSE documents illustrate that the outlook of the various General Secretaries was decisive, before and throughout the war, and confirm that Gorbachev's leadership was the critical element in shifting the direction of Soviet policy in Afghanistan. MALSE materials reveal that Gorbachev initially had little patience with the military's explanations as to why it failed to stabilize Afghanistan. But, despite reservations about the troubled mission from the outset of his tenure, he gave the military an additional year in 1985 (his first year in power) to turn things around, before formally and aggressively initiating an effort to withdraw.<sup>15</sup>

This manuscript is part of a small, but now expanding, body of literature that is emerging among scholars and practitioners who have either gained access to Politburo archives related directly to the conflict or been provided notes from those meetings. Still, even within this body of literature, what follows represents an important approach to analyzing Soviet failure in Afghanistan. Identifying the three reasons for Soviet failure in light of access to these documents---the civil-military divide, the rapid succession of leadership, and the reputational risk to Soviet prestige---offers a fresh perspective on the decisions made by Soviet political leaders. They need to be added to, and indeed emphasized more than, the three reasons endorsed in existing literature---Soviet military

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<sup>14</sup> A number of cold war retrospectives exist that have provided a clarifying view of the Soviet War in Afghanistan. Those most important to this research include: Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton eds., "Afghanistan and the Soviet Withdrawal 20 Years Later," George Washington University's National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 272, found online at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272>, accessed on 7 May, 2010; the exceptional Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' CUIHP document collection and in particular the document reader for the "Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan" from a 2002 conference entitled "Towards an International History of the War in Afghanistan" at CUIHP Virtual Archive, <http://222.cuihp.org/>; and finally, Westad's *Global Cold War* which provides detail surrounding Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, particularly as it pertains to the initial invasion ("The Islamic Defiance," 288-330 and "The Gorbachev Withdrawal," 364-395).

<sup>15</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 13 November 1986, Document 1/1, Hoover Soviet Archives, MALSE, ESOE translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 89-14-41.

"Gorbachev let both the Afghan leadership and his own military know that they had one year to make decisive progress" from Rubin, 145.



failure, Soviet diplomatic failure, and Afghan incapacity---to explain the overall failure of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

In the existing body of literature, the three most important books related to this research are *A Long Goodbye* by Artemy Kalinovsky, *Afghantsy* by Roderic Braithwaite, and *The Global Cold War* by Odd Arne Westad. These scholars have utilized the Soviet Politburo archives for the war but not necessarily the original documents. In most cases, they work from incomplete notes made by former Soviet officials. In contrast, this manuscript is based on full translations of the original documents. It also makes use of the recollections of former Soviet officials in books and Cold War history projects to provide context for Politburo decisions.

Roderic Braithwaite, who served as the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union at the time of withdrawal, gives a detailed account of the decision to intervene in *Afghantsy*. His Politburo evidence comes from material provided to him from the Gorbachev Foundation. His focus is on defining the impact of the experience of the war on the country, not on determining why the Soviets failed. For that focus, he relied on interviews with senior government officials and Soviet military personnel. In considering the decision to intervene, Braithwaite does point out the gap that existed between the Politburo and the military establishment. He shows that the Soviet generals expressed their deep reservations and warned that invasion would lead to an expansion of the Islamic resistance and heightening of Cold War tensions.<sup>16</sup> This manuscript reinforces that point.

Artemy Kalinovsky, for his part, provides great insight into the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. He makes clear that Gorbachev's primary concern was military and economic costs that might prevent the success of his domestic reform agenda.<sup>17</sup> Whether the Soviet Union won the war was of much less concern to the General Secretary. And an overarching explanation of why the Soviets failed is no more to be found in Kalinovsky's book than in Braithwaite's work.

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<sup>16</sup> Roderic Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–1989* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2011) 77.

<sup>17</sup> Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 74.

Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War*, written in 2008, builds on his work from 1996, "Concerning the Situation in A..." written for the Woodrow Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project (CWIHP).<sup>18</sup> His use of notes of Politburo archives and interviews with former Soviet officials makes his chapters on the "Islamist Defiance" and "The Gorbachev Withdrawal" important contributions to the developing body of work, which reveals the Soviets' true motivations for their invasion and their withdrawal. But Westad overreaches when he suggests that the Soviet failure was preordained. In his view, "the basic policy failure of the Soviet Afghan intervention was the belief that foreign power could be used to secure the survival and ultimate success of a regime that demonstrably could not survive on its own."<sup>19</sup> It was utterly unclear to Soviet leaders at the time that the new regime under Babrak Karmal installed in December 1979 could not survive on its own and so this was not the basic policy failure. The Soviet Union was initially intent on replacing what it viewed as a corrupt and disloyal regime under Haffizullah Amin. If the Soviets had simply departed after the initial change of regime, Westad's point would have merit. There were, however, nine additional years of Soviet commitment that require a more nuanced judgment.

Joseph Collins' *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* is also a noteworthy contribution to the literature even though it was written in 1985, long before access to archives or other key primary sources became available. Collins was able to deduce that the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan as a response to fears that its southern flank would be vulnerable to western encroachment, not as the first step of a march to the Persian Gulf.<sup>20</sup> In his view, Brezhnev invaded only as a last resort and with the hope that the Soviet troops would not be in Afghanistan for long.

Alexander Lyakhovsky's "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan" and other documents from the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars are useful as an introduction to archival material not

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<sup>18</sup> Odd Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in 'A.': New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 8–9 (Winter 1996/1997), 262–264.

<sup>19</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 326.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1986), 131–135.

available to Collins that allows readers to make some provisional evaluation of the motivations of the Soviet policy makers.<sup>21</sup> But notes from Politburo meetings and references to “interviews” with former Soviet officials are too sketchy to support solid conclusions. Where the existing body of literature as a whole falls short is that in no case has there been a thorough explanation of Soviet failure. The originality of this dissertation lies in the deeper and more thorough analysis of why the Soviet Union did not succeed in Afghanistan.

## **B. ORIGINALITY OF THE ARGUMENT**

This manuscript is the first to present these three specific prongs to the argument explaining Soviet failure in Afghanistan. Although it is not the first time that an argument has been presented of the war as a failure at the center of Soviet power, it is the first to move beyond simple Politburo miscalculation to identify what drove those miscalculations. This manuscript makes clear that the Soviet General Secretaries and Politburo who oversaw the conduct of the war were primarily responsible for the failure in that they overestimated the ability of Soviet security assistance and direct military action to stabilize a client regime. The two most recently published books on the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan agree that the dithering by Soviet political leaders had a significant role in the failure. Nonetheless, in this author’s view, while the works of Kalinovsky and Braithwaite do present vivid detail surrounding the decision to invade, waging of the war and withdrawal---neither author goes quite far enough. As do contributions to the Cold War International History Project, they place an emphasis on the contributions of the United States to Soviet failure. This distorts the record by giving the United States more credit than it is due. The “Charlie Wilson’s War” argument has gained ground in this way, but it is a mischaracterization of the actual evidence, which we now have. As Larry Goodson has noted, in the 1980s, journalists wrote many of the books about the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> These accounts tend to mix

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<sup>21</sup> Alexander Lyakhovsky’s “Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan” and other documents from the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center of Scholars, available

<sup>22</sup> Edward Girardet wrote the best of this genre of journalistic books on the Soviet war, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

anecdotal accounts with their own analyses of the dangers of reporting from the war-torn land. A few select secondary sources address how strategies shifted from one General Secretary to the next, while the MALSE materials provide the information on the Politburo debates over Afghan policy from invasion to withdrawal.<sup>23</sup> This manuscript draws on MALSE both to confirm and critically assess existing arguments and to identify the three primary reasons for Soviet failure.

## **1. Civil-military Divide**

One would expect Soviet military leaders to have played an important role in decisions at the center. This dissertation finds that they did not. To understand why, we must understand Soviet civil-military relations. There is a general literature on that subject which, though it does not shed much light on the Afghan war, is useful for context. The best available literature on the subject includes: Thomas Nichols' *The Sacred Cause: Civil-Military Conflict over Soviet National Security, 1917–1992*; Roger Reese's *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917–1991*; Brian Taylor's *Politics and the Russian Army*; Timothy Colton's *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority*; Roman Kolkowicz' *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* written in 1985; and William Odom's *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*. In historical perspective, a question that looms is whether Stalin's purges of senior military leaders that began in 1937 and lasted until the outbreak of war in June 1941 figured prominently in their institutional memory. Stalin's purges thinned the ranks of the military, particularly outspoken and innovative senior leaders, and left an indelible mark on Russian history by creating fears, expectations, and institutional habits. In *The Soviet Military Experience*, Roger Reese suggests that the long-term importance of the Stalinist purges was that the simultaneous rapid expansion of the military prior to World War II resulted in a dramatic shortage of trained officers. He asserts that this shortage of officers created problems in applying force and implementing of foreign-policy decisions

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<sup>23</sup> Larry Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), xii. In addition to Edward Girardet, Henry Bradsher and Selig Harrison stand out as the three best journalists who reported on the war from Afghanistan.

effectively were problems that extended into the post-World War II era.<sup>24</sup> In *Politics and the Russian Army*, Brian Taylor concludes that Soviet military officers subscribed to the belief that they were outside politics, and so although they were members of the communist party following World War II they were reticent to become involved in policy discussions after Stalin's death. Taylor links this norm of obedience to civilian superiors to memories of what happened under Stalin in the 1930s.<sup>25</sup> Early Soviet military leaders thought they had a duty to speak their minds. They paid for that candor with their lives during Stalin's purges. Their successors learned the lesson that it was prudent not to challenge the views of political leaders.

Four distinct characterizations of Soviet civil-military relations dominate the scholarly literature and must be understood when evaluating the impact of civil-military relations on the war in Afghanistan. In the first characterization, Roman Kolkowicz suggests constant conflict between military and Party officials. As the Soviet military struggled to maintain professional autonomy, Party officials worked diligently to undermine their efficiency. From this perspective, the history of Soviet civil-military relations is a study of conflict between a sole power holder and one of the primary instruments of that power. From the beginning, the military sought to establish itself as a powerful force that challenged civilian control while enhancing its overall position in Soviet society.<sup>26</sup> Another characterization maintains that the Soviet Communist Party created the military and thus eliminated natural tensions, making Party and military dependent on one another for their survival. Although they might have disagreed on some issues, William Odom asserts that cooperation was always the hallmark of the relationship. As bureaucratic executors of the Party's will, they acted for the betterment of the Soviet Union despite occasional differences of opinion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: A History of the Soviet Army, 1917–1991* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Brian Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136–137.

<sup>26</sup> Roman Kolkowicz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (New Haven: Westview Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>27</sup> William Odom is the proponent of this school of thought. It is expressed in Colton and Gustafson, 13.

A third view is that Soviet civil-military relations were defined by coalitions in which the Soviet Communist Party maintained dominance and the military remained politically involved. Conflicts between Party and military officials ebbed and flowed, from one CPSU General Secretary to the next, especially after Stalin. This characterization suggests there was always an intricate balance between candor and influence, in a system where the Communist Party denied the military complete control. There were many examples of interactions between military and civilian elites where neither side dominated, but where the Communist Party's power over both was readily accepted.<sup>28</sup> In this expression of the relationship, Timothy Colton suggests that Soviet defense policies resulted from extended bargaining and political maneuvering among a variety of interested institutions.<sup>29</sup> William Odom and Roman Kolkowicz, on the other hand, treat the Soviet Communist Party and military as separate entities, with limited participation by military officers in the political process. But this assessment misrepresents the nature of the relationship since there is significant evidence that senior military officers strongly criticized the Afghan intervention as fundamentally flawed at the outset, and expressed their own grave reservations about the manner in which the withdrawal was later carried out. Colton's description of the Soviet system as a participatory model best exemplifies how senior Soviet military officers and most senior civilian CPSU officials were both excluded from the decision-making process.

Historical accounts clearly suggest that there was a time during Leonid Brezhnev's tenure when the military establishment had a powerful voice, one that was especially listened to during the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. From a military perspective, this period was the golden age of Soviet civil-military relations. There was a combination of a vast military build-up and a determination to confront U.S. military power, both of which enhanced the military's access to the political process. William Odom describes this as a time of "congruent values" between military officers and senior

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<sup>28</sup> Timothy Colton is the originator of this paradigm in Soviet civil-military relations in his work, *Commissars, Commanders and Civilian Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 4–5 and 14.

<sup>29</sup> Also described by Timothy Colton in his chapter entitled "The Party-Military Connection: a Participatory Model" found in Dale R. Herspring and Iván Völgyes, eds., *Civil-Military Relations in Communist Systems* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978), 63.

Party officials. Timothy Colton refers to “compatible objectives and crosscutting interests” between military and Party leaders. Thomas Nichols suggests that civilians abdicated control and that the political leadership chose not to challenge a politically powerful military.<sup>30</sup> Brian Taylor, in his book *Politics and the Russian Army*, suggests that under Brezhnev (1964–1982), the military establishment received everything it requested.<sup>31</sup> Yet, while this may have been true early in Brezhnev’s tenure, it changed dramatically in his last few years, when the most important decisions on the intervention in Afghanistan were made.

Much of the recent literature on the Soviet civil-military divide covers the war in Afghanistan. But new evidence allows us to go into greater depth, on the impact of the war on civil-military relations and also of deteriorating civil-military relations on the conduct of the war. At the very least, the unique relationship between the senior military officials and Politburo members before the war must be better understood before making a cogent determination of where responsibility for Soviet failure lies.

### **C. RAPID SUCCESSION OF SOVIET LEADERSHIP**

Another issue that deserves a closer look is recurring turnover at the top of the Soviet political system. In all, four General Secretaries oversaw the conduct of war lasting just over nine years. The discontinuity among the senior leaders is sufficiently important that the dissertation’s chapters are organized accordingly, rather than by the phases of the war. Though the existing literature discusses how each General Secretary’s perspective differed from that of his predecessors, it does not come to grips with the degree to which the resulting instability contributed to strategic failure. The argument in this dissertation is that turnover at the top of the Soviet government created a political

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<sup>30</sup> Colton, “The Party-Military Connection: A Participatory Model,” in *Civil-Military Relations in Communist Systems*, ed. Dale R. Herspring and Ivan Volgyes (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978), 27–52; Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 2, 279–81; Thomas M. Nichols, *The Sacred Cause: Civil-Military Conflict over Soviet National Security, 1917–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 90–129.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, 192. Also of note, Jeremy Azrael coined the phrase “golden age” of civil-military relations in his work *The Soviet Civilian Leadership and the Military High Command, 1976–1986* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1987).

dynamic of its own that made a decision to withdraw from Afghanistan more difficult. Each new General Secretary was reluctant to start his tenure in office by embracing military defeat (however inevitable it might have seemed at that point), but found it politically expedient instead to give the military more time and something tantamount to an order to “try harder.” From this perspective, what stand out in the literature are memoirs and other recollections of high-level officials who served the General Secretaries during the war years. But none of these first-hand sources establish a link between the instability at the top and the inertial quality of the Soviet war effort.

#### **D. SOVIET PRESTIGE AND REPUTATIONAL RISK**

The matter of prestige associated with the war in Afghanistan for the Soviet leadership is the most widely accepted among the three reasons for failure to be described in this dissertation. Artemy Kalinovsky and Odd Arne Westad are the most helpful authors on this issue. Still, the tendency (even with Kalinovsky and Westad) is not to regard preserving Soviet prestige as a primary reason for failure. This manuscript will articulate how it was a problem that repeatedly arose for each General Secretary and came to dominate the Politburo’s attitude toward the mission. What follows will add to the existing insights into how the hubris of the Politburo developed and the political leaders became obsessed with the threat that withdrawal from Afghanistan posed to Soviet prestige.

An excellent three-volume monograph authored by John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich and John F. Shull entitled “An Analytical Comparison of U.S.-Soviet Assessments during the Cold War” best underscore the link between the impact of rapid succession and the persisting concerns over prestige which prevented an earlier withdrawal. In this series of documents, it becomes clear that Brezhnev was incapable of “unifying or coordinating the work of the Politburo”<sup>32</sup> and reluctantly concluded that any early withdrawal of Soviet forces would inflict unacceptable damage to the international reputation of the state.

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<sup>32</sup> John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich and John F. Shull, “An Analytical Comparison of U.S.-Soviet Assessments during the Cold War,” Volume 1 (McLean: BDM Federal, September 22, 1995), 51.



Other scholars like Raymond L. Garthoff express how concerns over prestige continued through the Andropov regime. He suggests that the former KGB Director sought a way out of Afghanistan, but died before he could find a face-saving approach.<sup>33</sup> While Larry Goodson in his book *Afghanistan's Endless War* describes Chernenko's determination to achieve victory as a means to reestablish the reputation of Soviet dominance.<sup>34</sup> Taken together the MALSE documents best address the concerns of Gorbachev and the Politburo in the final years of the war. In these archives Gorbachev and his inner circle repeatedly express the dangers of withdrawing too soon and voice concerns about developing a reputation among third world communist countries for abandoning their friends, as highlighted by Kalinovsky.

The Cold War International History Project is the best source to understand the process of realization that Gorbachev went through as he engaged Western leaders on the war. The collection of documents entitled "Gorbachev and Afghanistan," edited by Christian Ostermann, provides an excellent account of the General Secretary's questioning the commitment of Western leaders (Secretary of State Schultz, Vice President George Bush, and President Reagan in particular) to seeing the fighting stop. As Gorbachev pressed these officials for assistance in ending the war, he gradually realized that the very objective of the United States was to keep the Soviets mired in the war. This series of notes and records of conversations illustrates how Gorbachev finally became determined to end the war on his own unilateral timeline.<sup>35</sup>

The next chapter will lay the foundation for the argument that follows. Any analysis of Soviet failure in Afghanistan is incomplete without a look to the Soviet past.

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<sup>33</sup> Raymond L. Garthoff, "Why Did the Cold War Arise, and Why Did It End?," *International Affairs (Moscow)* (April-May 1992): 119–20.

<sup>34</sup> Goodson, 63–64.

<sup>35</sup> Christian F. Ostermann, "Gorbachev and Afghanistan" from the *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, 1998, 143–186.

### III. SETTING THE STAGE

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan buried the possibility of improving international relations for a long time. This action essentially resulted in a new and more dangerous edition of the Cold War.<sup>36</sup>

**---Mikhail Gorbachev, *Gorbachev: On My Country and the World***

In 1979 success seemed certain in Afghanistan for the Soviet Union, and yet its intervention ended in failure. To understand the roots of the Soviet failure in Afghanistan the history of the Soviet military's relationship with its Communist Party must be examined. In the decades before the invasion, the Soviets over-estimated their capacity to invade Afghanistan and create a pro-Soviet government with the ability to convert the population to socialism. The roots of this misperception lay in Moscow's perception of the universal appeal of communist doctrine as a framework for economic, political, and social progress, the presence of collaborationist parties in target states, and the apparent successes of the communization of Eastern Europe combined with the persistence of Marxist-inspired revolutions in the Third World. There seemed to be no disagreement about these goals and strategies between Soviet party leaders and the military, nor about the need to create strategic buffers on the USSR's frontiers. Soviet civil-military relations had also benefitted from a generally stable transfer of power from one General Secretary to the next, as well as the international prestige of being a superpower inherited in the wake of World War II, reinforced by nuclear weapons and an extremely powerful conventional army. Therefore, the invasion of Afghanistan occurred at a time when the USSR appeared to be at the height of its military power and international influence, and at a time of generally friction-free civil-military relations.

#### A. EVOLUTION OF PARTY-MILITARY RELATIONS

It had not always been thus in the USSR. From the inception of the Soviet Union in 1922, civil-military relations were roiled by mutual suspicion between the party and

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<sup>36</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *On My Country and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 177.

the military. The collapse of the czarist regime in 1917 followed by the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War occurred in large part because many professional officers threw their support to the revolutionaries. Instructions issued from the new Soviet government in 1917 had called for soldiers to disobey their officers, which threw the military establishment, already stressed by repeated defeats at the hands of the German Army, into further disarray. Together, the German Army and the Bolsheviks destroyed the cohesion, discipline, and political subordination of the czarist army. Once the Soviet Union was established in 1922, relations between the civilian leadership and the military establishment were marked by suspicion, in part because the Red Army had been largely the creation of Leon Trotsky, who had fallen out with Stalin and eventually went into exile. The civil-military relations dilemma for the world's first communist state was that it distrusted the political ambitions of the very army it required to defend the Homeland of the Revolution. These tensions between the party and the professional soldiers proved difficult to resolve, which gave rise to periodic and sometimes bloody crises of civil-military relations that inevitably cast a shadow over the formulation of strategy.

### **1. Civilian-Military Relations under Lenin**

As Richard Overy has observed, the civil war that followed the Bolshevik seizure of power “placed Soviet Communism on a war footing.”<sup>37</sup>

The new party became an agent of mobilization, in the towns, where workers were forced to join militia or dig defenses, and in the villages, where food was seized with a savage disregard for peasant survival and farmers were drafted, often against their will, into the tough regime of the young Red Army....The campaigns were undertaken in many cases by former officers of the Tsarist army, but control over strategy and operational decisions lay with local Military Committees or Soviet civilian revolutionaries, acting on the orders of the Central Committee. The army came to be viewed not as a professional force with its own institutions and commanders but as an arm of the broad social movement which was building Communism. The ideal of many revolutionaries was to do away with an army altogether and in its place to erect a popular militia of worker-peasant soldiers, the kind of revolutionary levee that Lenin, the architect of Bolshevik success in 1917, had described in *State and*

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Overy, *Russia's War: A History of the Soviet War Effort, 1941–1945* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 3.

*Revolution*, written the same year....The effect of the Communist military struggle which was finally won in 1920 was to create...a military socialism.<sup>38</sup>

From the outset, the tsarist military establishment was forced to define its goals, missions, organization, strategies, and even operational doctrine in the image of the party's ideological outlook and institutional interests. Even after the Bolshevik victory in the Russian Civil War (1917–1922), a significant percentage of military officers looked on the Bolsheviks with contempt, while the Bolshevik leadership made no secret of its distrust of the officer corps.<sup>39</sup> Lenin understood the general attitude of the officer corps, fully agreed with his revolutionary followers, and initially sought to abolish the army, because he and his comrades fundamentally distrusted military professionals to remain subordinate to the Party and because many believed naively that military science was unnecessary in an era of the *levée en masse* and industrialized warfare. However, even an army of peasants required professional organization and direction, while the fragile new state required professional military experts to protect it from external threats. This tension recurred in different forms throughout the history of the Soviet state.

Lenin's ideas about civilian control of the military came from the Marxist concept of class determinism, which meant that professional soldiers were members of the bourgeoisie, whose reflex was to protect their class interests. He expressed his vision for the military in *State and Revolution*:

Every revolution, by shattering the state apparatus, demonstrates to us how the ruling class aims at the restoration of the special bodies of armed men at its service, and how the oppressed class tries to create a new organization of this kind, capable of serving not the exploiters, but the exploited.<sup>40</sup>

Lenin thought it vital both to maintain both a revolutionary spirit in the military and to nurture its ability to respond when the state was threatened. A main concern was the prospect of the military becoming a threat to the government. The Bolsheviks incorporated political officers (called military commissars) into the army from 1918 with

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, 125.

<sup>40</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 11.

the mission of providing both ideological guidance and political supervision. The expectation was that the presence of political officers would ensure that military thinking conformed to Party ideology.<sup>41</sup> Lenin believed that it was the responsibility of the Party leadership to generate political guidelines, which would frame the actions of a professional military in defending the state's interests.

## **2. Stalin and the Purges**

Under Stalin, civilian intervention in military matters became much more intrusive, to the point that it seriously undermined military readiness on the eve of World War II. Given the unparalleled scope of his personal power, Stalin had no need to use military doctrine as a mechanism to underwrite his control. Rather, as an inveterate conspirator himself, Stalin saw plots against his regime everywhere. Nevertheless, he based his directives on a real or invented failure of certain officers to implement Communist doctrine in order to give them an aura of legitimacy.<sup>42</sup> Although Stalin encouraged military participation in politics, he was not interested in providing the armed forces a platform to debate military doctrine. Indeed, in the 1930s, the military establishment faced increased political peril by arguing the substance of defense policy with civilian counterparts. Such debates slowly gave Stalin the impression that the military sought to undermine his authority.<sup>43</sup> This anxiety in turn gave rise to the ruthless purges of the late 1930s.

When Stalin became Communist Party General Secretary and leader of the Soviet state, he was adamant that military influence should have clearly defined parameters, distinct from civilian administrative responsibilities. In the early 1930s he told one of his commanders who was working with a regional Party secretary on peasant relief, that the two should not be cooperating. He made it clear that “the military should occupy themselves with their own business and not discuss things that do not concern them.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nichols, 15–16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>44</sup> Colton, “Perspectives on Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet Union,” 22 in Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson, eds., *Soldiers and the Soviet State: Civil Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Before 1935, the professional military largely controlled military doctrine, although there was little real trust or mutual regard between the military and civilians.<sup>45</sup> The control of doctrine meant control of men and materiel and, by extension, power. Stalin, however, had no intention of sharing power. Several extremely talented and experienced officers stood between Stalin and his idea of legitimate control of military doctrine. In 1937, his insecurity about their greater expertise, experience and prestige reached a breaking point.

The military establishment was not the first sector of the Soviet government to endure Stalin's brutal wrath. In 1933, the Party expelled 790,000 Party members on corruption charges. In 1934, over 50% of the 1,966 delegates at the 17th Party Congress faced firing squads as enemies of the people. Soviet accounts of this period suggest that 680,000 people were executed between 1934 and 1938.<sup>46</sup> Although every other branch of government endured Stalin's brutality, the Soviet military establishment had avoided terror until the morning of 11 June 1937.

It is still not known what if any specific episode prompted Stalin to target the officer corps. He might have believed unsubstantiated rumors and suspected the officer corps' reliability, or he might have felt inadequate discussing military strategy. More likely, periodic purges were a way to create fear and strengthen his hold on the party and bureaucracy. Whatever the impetus, the first military victims were eight senior Red Army commanders who were imprisoned and beaten into confessing to conspiracy. The military purge gained momentum and spread through the rest of the senior officer ranks. As a result of the purge, 45% of the senior officers, including 720 of 837 officers at the rank of colonel and above, were executed or imprisoned. Out of 85 senior officers on the Military Council in 1937,<sup>47</sup> 71 were dead by 1941.<sup>48</sup> The purge significantly affected the perception of Soviet prestige and strength abroad, and it strengthened the conviction of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>46</sup> Overy, 22–25.

<sup>47</sup> The Military Council was the uniformed services' appendage to the Stalin-led Defense Commission. Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 18.

<sup>48</sup> Overy, 25–30.

German military leaders that the lack of experienced leadership made the Soviet Army vulnerable to defeat, a prophesy that seemed to come true in the Russo-Finnish War of 1939–1940.

The purge was especially harmful to military efficiency as it came at a time of a vast expansion of the Soviet Army in response to the rising threat posed by Germany. Rather than trust highly trained professionals with expertise in modern doctrines of maneuver warfare, Stalin relied on the sacrificial courage of an armed nation. Between January 1939 and May 1941, the Kremlin activated 161 new divisions, which created an enormous demand for officers. By 1941, there were more than 100,000 officers entering the Soviet military each year. By May 1941, 75% of all officers were new to their positions and 80% of those junior officers (at the rank of captain and below) fired in 1938 were reinstated to begin rebuilding the Army. At Stalin's urging, the new General Staff accelerated the modernization and expansion of the Soviet heavy industrial base. This expansion prevented the Soviet military from relying solely on poorly armed peasants to face a modern German arsenal.<sup>49</sup>

The purge eliminated some of the Soviet military's finest minds and anyone with claims to military expertise greater than Stalin's.<sup>50</sup> The General Secretary insisted that political officers in every unit should have a prominent role, just as they had during the Civil War, which amplified the triumph of military illiteracy. Estimates suggest that 73% of the political officers had no military training, yet they were placed in military units down to the company and platoon level. If a political officer deemed a decision by the military commander to be antithetical to the Party line, it could mean prison time for the officer and his family.<sup>51</sup> When the purge was complete, Stalin suspended the military commissar system, perhaps feeling his control was finally well established. He would, however, use this tool again under duress after the Germans attacked.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 32–33.

<sup>50</sup> Nichols, 47.

<sup>51</sup> Overy, 32–33.

### **3. World War II and the Defeat of Germany**

On June 22, 1941, three Germany army groups, consisting of 5,500,000 troops, advanced on Russia along three separate axes. At the time of the attack, the Soviets had their four million soldiers forward positioned in keeping with revolutionary military doctrine. A considerable force was also deployed along the border with Manchuria following clashes with the Japanese army at Nomonhan in 1939. All military personnel were understandably timid, confused and overly responsive to Stalin's uncoordinated interference in military matters. The purges had thinned the ranks of military agencies like the main intelligence directorate (GRU), and the Party showed no respect for the GRU assessments, or U.S. and British warnings from the spring of 1941, that a German attack on the Soviet Union was imminent. When the attack came, the Soviet military units near the western border were unable to stop the German blitzkrieg.<sup>52</sup> Many Soviet citizens, especially non-Russian minorities like Ukrainians, compounded the early failures by initially, and misguidedly, welcoming the advancing German Army as liberators; this was a reaction to having endured so many years of Stalin's cruelty.<sup>53</sup>

As the Soviets worked feverishly to ensure an orderly retreat during the first disastrous weeks of the war, Stalin reintroduced the military commissar system to all military units in order to stiffen the Army's reliability and fighting spirit. He ordered the execution of all senior officers who suffered catastrophic losses. At the same time, he offered rank-and-file soldiers full membership in the Communist Party with an eye toward cementing their loyalty and boosting troop morale.<sup>54</sup>

By December 1941, German troops had penetrated to within 25 kilometers of Moscow, and the Soviet Union had lost most of its economically vital regions. Although this proved to be the limit of the German advance (except for further advances in the summer of 1942 to the gates of Stalingrad), it took time for this to become apparent. At the precipice of total collapse, help arrived in the form of \$1 billion in Lend-Lease from the United States, aid that would continue and expand after the United States joined the

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<sup>52</sup> Scott and Scott, 22.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23.



war against Germany. Russia's immense size and harsh climate provided defensive advantages, along with the enormous casualties that the Red Army, for all its military ineptitude, inflicted upon the Germans. The Germans exacted losses on the Red Army in ratios of up to four to one, yet could not land the knockout blow.<sup>55</sup> The Soviet replaced their losses; the Germans could not to the same degree.

By the fall of 1942, the Soviet high command had regained enough of Stalin's confidence for him to restructure and diminish the impact of the military commissar system, which effectively restored unity of command across the Soviet Army. Military performance began to improve, as evidenced by the epochal victory at Stalingrad in February 1943. For the first time, large Soviet forces effectively carried out concerted maneuvers, and the war ground on with the Red Army finally seizing the initiative.<sup>56</sup> In spite of the purge of the officer corps before the start of the war, the Soviets defeated Germany. However, appointing inexperienced officers to important positions did long-term damage to the civil-military relationship. Stalin's purge was an event intended to be remembered, and it was, despite the halo of victory that came to surround the subsequent Soviet war effort. Stalin's legacy to civil-military relations was one of enduring distrust, offset by an equally enduring faith that, when put to the test, the Red Army, Soviet peasants and workers in uniform, were equal to any challenge.<sup>57</sup>

#### **4. Nikita Khrushchev's Struggle**

The Red Army's victory over the Nazis was one of the central legitimizing achievements of the Soviet state. The irony was that victory in 1945 further weakened civilian control of the military. The CPSU's control over military doctrine eroded after Stalin's death, largely owing to the new prestige the Red Army acquired from its defeat of Germany. The effect was to give the military a major voice in the development of national security policy. Discussions of national security in the Soviet Union centered on military doctrine, which meant that these discussions were highly charged ideological

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>57</sup> Nichols, 54–55.

debates, and military commissars retained their strong political voice in military affairs.<sup>58</sup> Under Khrushchev, officers could again express their opinions and question the formulation of strategy without fear of immediate reprisal or execution.

Khrushchev's tenure as Soviet leader was defined at the start by the reemergence of military prestige, which was then followed by its gradual diminution, and finally ended with an unsuccessful attempt by the General Secretary to secure Stalin-like control. Khrushchev, whose reputation had been built as a political commissar in both the Russian Civil War and the Battle of Stalingrad, came to office intent on loosening central government control over the military. He seemed to allow for greater focus on military professionalism rather than fealty. Both civil and military institutions welcomed the general "de-Stalinization" campaign that became a prominent feature of the early Khrushchev era. The military victims who survived Stalin's purges regained their reputations, and the battered officer corps recovered their sense of personal security and professional autonomy.<sup>59</sup>

This sense of relief did not necessarily translate into submission to their new leader, however.<sup>60</sup> Within a year of Stalin's death, even before Khrushchev had consolidated his leadership, the military establishment took advantages of leadership rivalries in the Politburo to assert itself in matters of military doctrine.<sup>61</sup> Although Khrushchev gave the outward impression of a closer relationship with the military, he intended to preserve the prerogatives exercised by Stalin.

The defining civil-military event of Khrushchev's tenure occurred in 1957, when he removed Marshal Georgy Zhukov from his position as Minister of Defense. Zhukov, one of the outstanding military figures of the Second World War, unilaterally used his considerable influence to direct military commanders to marginalize military commissars. He intended to make professional military officers responsible for military matters and confine political officers to a lesser role. Military commissars complained to Khrushchev

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>59</sup> Colton, "Perspectives on Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet Union," 24.

<sup>60</sup> Nichols, 52.

<sup>61</sup> Condoleezza Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union," *World Politics*, vol. 40, no. 1 (October 1987), 60.

that Zhukov was blocking promotions of Party workers within the military structure.<sup>62</sup> Khrushchev was thus faced with the familiar and recurring choice between the requirements of military professionalism and those of political control. Like his more bloody-minded predecessors he chose the latter---less ferociously than Stalin, but no less firmly.

Regarding Zhukov as a definite threat to his power within the CPSU and a disruption to the Party's efforts to control the military, Khrushchev dismissed Zhukov on trumped up charges of "Bonapartism" and treason. Zhukov's removal reasserted Party primacy over the military establishment, as well as Khrushchev's own.<sup>63</sup> In addition, it significantly affected institutional memory, as the CPSU swiftly asserted that it would not tolerate any challenges to Communist principles. The lowering of the prestige of the military establishment in the process meant reduced influence of the military within the CPSU structure as well.<sup>64</sup> A senior officer without much real influence or popularity in military circles replaced Zhukov, which sent a message that was difficult to misinterpret, or forget.<sup>65</sup> Thereafter, there could be no doubt about the risks involved in politically challenging the Party, as even the most prestigious generals, like Hero of the Soviet Union Marshal Zhukov, had no protection.

Shortly after Zhukov's dismissal, the Party centralized the political administration of all military services in the Main Political Administration, thus ensuring controls and directives would be the same for all the arms of the military establishment. The Party administered the military system until the Soviet Union's dissolution, which allowed the Party to make promotions and assign officers to key positions for 35 years.<sup>66</sup> The objective was to ensure that military commissars were integrally involved in every activity of their assigned military units.<sup>67</sup> While Khrushchev was personally happy to reassert his authority over the military, the goal of the CPSU leadership as a whole was to

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<sup>62</sup> Scott and Scott, 285.

<sup>63</sup> Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority*, 175.

<sup>64</sup> Scott and Scott, 285–286.

<sup>65</sup> Zhores A. Medvedev, *Andropov: An Insider's Account of Power and Politics within the Kremlin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 106.

<sup>66</sup> Scott and Scott, 286.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

ensure that senior military officials would never again place military professionalism above ideological imperatives.<sup>68</sup>

The Zhukov Affair illustrated Khrushchev's determination to exercise direct control over the military establishment.<sup>69</sup> It marked the turning point at which he began to meddle openly in matters of military strategy, about which he had developed some quite specific ideas. For instance, Khrushchev believed that the existence of nuclear weapons made a large military force unnecessary. He asserted that the new technology of long-range ballistic missiles, together with nuclear weapons, were the decisive elements of military power.<sup>70</sup>

In the long run, Khrushchev's intrusion into military strategy paved the way for his removal. In January 1960, without coordinating with the General Staff or Defense Council, he unilaterally announced deep cuts in Soviet troop strength and shockingly eliminated the entire Ground Forces Command. He believed that doctrine and procurement should focus primarily on nuclear weapons, which would allow him to reduce the number of troops. Khrushchev developed his own brand of military doctrine, completely bypassing the military establishment. In the process, he offended the vast majority of his senior officers, most of whom were veterans of the ferocious conventional campaigns of the Second World War.<sup>71</sup> By the time Khrushchev finally instituted his defense plans, the military establishment had become accustomed to its post-Stalin degree of autonomy.<sup>72</sup> Stalin's supremacy over the officer corps had produced a bloody purge of epic proportions, but those days were now over. Khrushchev removed a single officer, albeit the greatest among them, but it was no longer possible for anyone to remove them all.

In his memoirs, Khrushchev recalled how senior military officials resisted his efforts to assert direct control:

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>69</sup> Nichols, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union," 60.

<sup>71</sup> Colton, "Perspectives on Civil-Military Relations in the Soviet Union," 24.

<sup>72</sup> Nichols, 56.

Behind closed doors the generals pressed their policy opinions energetically and persistently. Soldiers will be soldiers. They always want a bigger and stronger army. They always insist on having the very latest weapons and on attaining quantitative as well as qualitative superiority over the enemy.<sup>73</sup>

Although the military establishment played no direct role in the ouster of Khrushchev when he was finally deposed in October 1964, the General Staff lobbied hard for greater control of defense policy. It sought protection from the haphazard and dangerous political interference it had endured since Lenin's death. The General Staff endorsed more technical approaches to military planning in order to prevent the unskilled dabbling that both Stalin and Khrushchev had exhibited.<sup>74</sup> With the arrival of Leonid Brezhnev as General Secretary in 1964, military leaders finally appeared to have found someone who would give them that latitude.

## **5. Brezhnev's Retreat and Emergence of the Golden Age**

Brezhnev's tenure as General Secretary consisted of two distinct periods. In the first, he retreated from asserting directive control of the military and lavished resources and support on the military establishment. This made his first ten years in power a "golden age of civil-military relations," at least from the military's perspective.<sup>75</sup> Thereafter, military spending leveled off, and he increasingly criticized, and failed to support, policies proposed by the military establishment.<sup>76</sup>

The increased civil-military cooperation in Brezhnev's first ten years (1964–1974) coincided with the initial inferiority of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal. Brezhnev empowered senior military officers to take the technical lead in closing the missile gap and strengthening Soviet military power to reflect what they believed was consistent with their international standing. That inferiority had contributed to the Soviets' backing-down during the Cuban missile crisis. The officer corps also benefited

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<sup>73</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (Boston: Little, 1974), 617.

<sup>74</sup> Noel E. Firth and James H. Noren, *Soviet defense spending: a history of CIA estimates, 1950–1990* (College Station: Tamu Press, 1998), 98–110; Rice, 61.

<sup>75</sup> Colton and Gustafson, 25.

<sup>76</sup> Myron Rush, "Guns over Growth in Soviet Policy," *International Security*, vol.7, no.3 (Cambridge: Harvard and MIT, Winter 1982/1983), 167–179.

politically from taking a hands-off approach during the succession struggle following Khrushchev's ouster.<sup>77</sup> In an effort to close the strategic gap with the West, Brezhnev and his Politburo embraced the new technocratic style of decision making favored by the military leadership. This tended to drain civil-military disagreements of their ideological venom, which meant issues could be resolved through bureaucratic compromise.<sup>78</sup> The seemingly unending confrontation with the West gradually inculcated the Party leadership with a reflexive belief in the primacy of military power over all other policy concerns, including domestic economic policy, which allowed military leaders to ignore, or override, the input of civilian ideologists on military matters.<sup>79</sup>

Through this golden age, Soviet military capability increased dramatically and the strategic gap with the West began to close. Brezhnev restored to prominence many military agencies that Stalin and Khrushchev had either ignored or deactivated, including the re-establishment of the Ground Forces Command in 1967.<sup>80</sup> Brezhnev modernized the entire military system in order to facilitate the more rapid advancement of officers to the senior ranks. The General Staff quickly became technologically sophisticated and led the trend toward scientific management of research and procurement. Ultimately senior military officials gained firm control of strategic planning and battlefield management, which gave the military establishment unprecedented prestige and influence in the Kremlin.<sup>81</sup> As Thomas Nichols observed in his work on civil-military conflict over Soviet national security:

The high command was allowed to prepare for almost every contingency it identified. The military took advantage of this open-ended resolution (that is to say, no resolution) to engage in the "all-azimuth" planning that characterized Soviet military policy in the 1960s and 1970s....The result was that the military and the military industrial complex were a government within the government whose sphere was perfectly untouchable.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Colton and Gustafson, 90.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>80</sup> Nichols, 94.

<sup>81</sup> Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union," 61.

<sup>82</sup> Nichols, 95.

## 6. End of the Golden Age

During Brezhnev's first decade in power, 12% to 18% of Gross National Product (GNP) was committed to defense spending.<sup>83</sup> Such spending could not be sustained indefinitely. Brezhnev traded upon the military establishment's increasing capacity, prestige, and success to increase his own. But he also knew that the military build-up came at the expense of the state's economic growth. Although Soviet interventionism in the post-colonial world—perhaps a natural expression of improving performance and growing self-confidence—increased tensions with the West, the larger economic picture nevertheless demanded that the pace of military spending be slowed.<sup>84</sup>

Brezhnev restructured his connection with the military establishment to reflect economic realities. In 1974, he fired two long-time rivals from the Politburo and added three new members, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, and Minister of Defense Marshal Andrei Grechko, his staunch supporters. Brezhnev never accepted the idea that Soviet military expansion provoked an arms race with the West. Neither did he allow civilian experts to encroach on the military's prerogative to make defense-related recommendations. As economic woes forced Brezhnev's hand, he tried to maintain cordial relationships with the military establishment.<sup>85</sup> Yet eventually the General Secretary began to tire of the military's insatiable demand for resources, and his commitment to civil-military peace began to fade as a consequence. Brezhnev also seemed to begin to understand the futility of planning for victory in a nuclear war, which reduced his willingness to throw money at a problem with apparently no ultimate solution.<sup>86</sup> Strategic planning was not his strength, but he well understood that his highest priority was to maintain the state's security, while improving the relative international position of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>83</sup> Noel E. Firth and James H. Noren, 98–110; Rice, 72. Many believe that CIA estimates were inaccurate---their numerator should have been higher and their denominator should have been lower.

<sup>84</sup> The USSR assisted with Cuban interventions in Angola (1975) and Ethiopia (1977), supported the pro-Cuban takeovers in Grenada and Nicaragua, and supplied arms to communist rebels in Mozambique (1977).

<sup>85</sup> Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union," 55.

<sup>86</sup> Nichols, 109.

Although Brezhnev's change in priorities might have been very logical, the military establishment did not support the shift. Increasingly, his efforts to keep the grumbling military in check forced him to wield the same directive control utilized by Stalin and Khrushchev before him.<sup>87</sup> He shrewdly diminished the stature of officials who opposed him and enhanced the influence of powerful civilian allies.<sup>88</sup> The promotion of Andropov and Gromyko to full Politburo membership, for example, significantly enhanced civilian access to the military decision-making process and gave them unprecedented leverage over the Defense Council.

The fact that Brezhnev signed the SALT I and ABM Treaty with the United States, against the strong objections of Minister of Defense (and senior military officer) Marshal Grechko, marked the end of the "golden age" of civil-military relations in the Soviet Union. Civilian control continued to increase after Grechko died in 1976, as Brezhnev replaced him with his old friend, Dmitri Ustinov, who had considerable experience dealing with the military as a top defense industry official for decades.<sup>89</sup> However, Ustinov did not follow his leader as slavishly as Brezhnev wanted. As one former Soviet official remarked, "It was as if Ustinov was (initially) trying to prove that a civilian minister could do even more for military departments than a professional soldier."<sup>90</sup> Still, by the time the Politburo was considering an Afghan invasion even Ustinov had grown weary of the officer corps' incessant demands.<sup>91</sup>

Brezhnev also "promoted" himself to Marshal of the Soviet Union (1976) as a way of symbolically asserting full control over the military establishment. In assuming

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Marshal Grechko and Brezhnev were good friends but their relationship suffered as a result of strong disagreements over arms control policy. Grechko believed that Soviet military power was the only effective counter balance against war with the West.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce Parrott, in *Soldiers and the Soviet State: Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, Colton and Gustafson, eds., 59. Ustinov was the first civilian to serve in the post of Minister of Defense since 1955.

<sup>90</sup> G.A. Arbatov, *Zatianuvsheesia vyzdorovlenie*, 233. G.A. Arbatov was the director of the Institute on the USA and Canada or IUSAC and was a leading proponent of the view that diplomacy and patience could bring the United States back to the bargaining table. He and some of his colleagues intimated that the USSR should avoid becoming embroiled in an arms race designed by the West to bankrupt the Soviet economy

<sup>91</sup> Dale R. Herspring, *The Soviet High Command, 1967–1989: Personalities and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 156.



this title and promoting Ustinov, Brezhnev completed the transition to full civilian control by eliminating military representation on both the Politburo and the Defense Council. He continued to solidify his position by replacing Marshal Victor Kulikov as Chief of the General Staff with a well-known technocrat, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov. Brezhnev hoped that Ogarkov would use his scientific background to promote technological and bureaucratic modernization that would save money. Ogarkov did move quickly to upgrade antiquated weapons programs and reorganize the military's generally ineffective command and control systems, but he showed little interest in reducing defense expenditures.

## **7. Ogarkov's Opposition**

Initially, Ogarkov supported efforts to stem the flow of resources into the military services.<sup>92</sup> After the U.S. failure to ratify the SALT II treaty, however, Ogarkov and the Politburo began to move in different directions. Ogarkov became increasingly concerned that the West was trying to alter the balance of power in Europe. This point of view put him at odds with Ustinov,<sup>93</sup> and eventually with Brezhnev, who saw Ogarkov's conduct as approaching insubordination. Ogarkov continued to press for more control over defense policy while Brezhnev made clear that "the CPSU formulates military policy and military doctrine and...guides the development of Soviet military science and military art."<sup>94</sup> Ogarkov was on official notice that he could only strengthen defense by more wisely utilizing existing resources, and this rebuke seemed to quiet him.<sup>95</sup>

The rapidly increasing technological sophistication of the Soviet armed forces, which the sizeable defense budgets of the early Brezhnev years had made possible, actually made effective civilian control more difficult to exercise. Brezhnev built his

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, "Soviet Dismissal Now being Laid to Policy Split," *New York Times*, Sept. 13, 1984, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Another conference focused on civil-military challenges was held in October 1982 with the objective of garnering Party support for reduced military spending in advance of the November Central Committee meeting which would determine the coming year's budget. During the meeting Ustinov took up the mantle for Brezhnev in stressing the need for "restraint in the face of imperialism's growing aggressiveness." John W. Parker, *Kremlin in Transition: Gorbachev, 1985-1989* (Florence: Routledge, 1991), 155.

bridges to the military establishment by providing it with the resources required to improve its technical capacity, but he did not create any parallel civilian expertise to provide alternative views, equal understanding, or proper supervision.

It soon became clear, for instance, that during arms-reduction negotiations military professionals were indispensable, because no civilians understood the weapon systems well enough to argue about them. The Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, referred to the troubling nature of technical military experts wielding influence during arms-control negotiations. He suggested that because the experts were professional military officers, defense planning was biased.<sup>96</sup> Many years after he had retired and the Soviet Union had crumbled, Dobrynin reflected on how this system put diplomats, KGB officers, and Party officials at a disadvantage in talks from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s:

I mean the Foreign Ministry---really knew very little. We knew very little about what was going on in our military thinking. But there was no way for ordinary---channels, working in the Foreign Ministry, to know what was going on. When I came back from Washington and saw friends in the KGB and General Staff, I began to learn some things. But this was just piece by piece; things were not well-connected in my mind. So I would return to Washington a little bit enlightened, but not on a great scale. I was enlightened on this particular sphere, or on that particular sphere---so that when I discussed things with you, I would try to learn from you. This was the situation. There was no system. It was as our Generals said. It was a closed society. Five, six men---who knows? And the whole Ministry---the Foreign Ministry, I mean---knew nothing except when we participated directly in formulating negotiation strategy. We had a very good team in Geneva, and in other places. We worked very closely together---military, diplomats, and KGB people. It was a very good team. But they weren't working together within their own society, so to speak. The military did not always tell us all, the whole story. Maybe they didn't know themselves---I mean, our participants in the negotiations. Or maybe there was some military discipline preventing it.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority in the Soviet Union," 80.

<sup>97</sup> CWIHP, Virtual Archive:

([http://www.wildoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier](http://www.wildoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier)). Original source: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, from notes taken by A.F. Dobrynin and provided to the Norwegian Nobel Institute; provided to CWIHP by Odd Arne Westad, Director of Research, Nobel Institute; translated for CWIHP by Daniel Rozas.

Civil-military relations became defined by the closed system that prevailed in which the civilian officials could not possibly know what the military establishment was doing. As will be seen, the eventual impact of this situation on Afghan policy was that the compartmentalization limited discourse among stakeholder organizations and precluded potentially valuable military contributions to any policy debate concerning an Afghan invasion.<sup>98</sup>

## **8. Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan**

During the early years of Brezhnev's tenure as General Secretary the military establishment had grown accustomed to controlling the military doctrine component of the national security policy debate. By the time the communist Saur Revolution occurred in Afghanistan<sup>99</sup> (1978), this had changed significantly. Brezhnev and the civilians who constituted his inner circle—Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov—were well aware of increasingly urgent domestic issues and the need to reduce defense expenditures. The tendency of all arguments about strategy to turn into arguments about the budget—arguments which were, in turn, couched in the ideologically charged (not to say apocalyptic) rhetoric of nuclear confrontation with the United States—further eroded the willingness of the civilian leadership to seek military advice on issues where military leaders possessed expertise. This would be true with regard to the invasion of Afghanistan as well. The military establishment was left undisturbed in its disgruntlement, ignored on matters where it had previously exercised excessive influence, and provided with even fewer resources than it might have truly needed.

Neither Khrushchev nor Brezhnev wished to repeat the experiences of Stalin's time. Both had entered office with an interest in working closely with the military, who were indeed the "Protectors of the Soviet Union." Yet, the intransigence and short-sightedness of the officer corps soon frustrated each leader. The flattening budgets of the

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<sup>98</sup> Harry Gelman, *Gorbachev's First Five Years in the Soviet Leadership: The Clash of Personalities and the Remaking of Institutions* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1990), 85. Also mentioned in William E. Odom, "The Militarization of Soviet Society," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 25, September-October 1976, 34–51.

<sup>99</sup> The Saur or "April" Revolution in Afghanistan in 1978 was a home grown communist revolution that led to the overthrow of Muhammed Daoud and installation of the less favored wing of the Afghan Communist Party (PDPA). This was not a revolution supported by the Soviet Union.

late 1970s did not result in a “belt-tightening attitude” among military officers. Instead, the cuts revealed the military’s belief that they had a privileged exemption from the struggles of Soviet society. As a result, the military establishment was not consulted on the decision to invade Afghanistan, probably because the most senior Politburo members knew that the military would use this opportunity either to object, ask for more resources, or do both. As a result of the increasing focus on the national budget that slowly, but surely, weighed them down during the latter half of Brezhnev’s tenure, senior military officers believed they were woefully underfunded in the face of a prodigious threat from the United States. The decision to invade Afghanistan was made in the midst of these concerns.

From the time of the USSR’s establishment, Soviet involvement in Afghanistan had focused on slowly but surely bringing it under greater Soviet influence. Before World War II the focus of effort had largely been diplomatic overtures and economic aid. After the war, the Soviets expanded their engagement to include military assistance. The success of this approach, coupled with a significant degree of political manipulation, was reflected in the prevailing position of the Soviets in 1978. The Soviet Union was easily Afghanistan’s largest source of economic aid, and the modernization of Afghanistan’s armed forces only occurred because of its direct support. In April 1978 it certainly appeared that the Soviet Union had achieved a position of decisive dominance, when the Afghan Communist Party violently overthrew Mohammad Daoud’s government.<sup>100</sup> The Soviet Union, however, was surprised and unprepared for the rapid pace of change in Afghanistan, including both internecine quarrels within the new government and rising resistance to new and more intrusive methods of political and social control in the countryside. Moscow could not afford to stand by and watch a communist revolution unfold “next door” without providing support, even less so if Afghanistan appeared to be getting itself into trouble. The communist faction that came to power in 1978 was not the Soviets’ preferred partner for establishing an openly pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. Even

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<sup>100</sup> Goodson, 53.

so, the revolution represented a Leninist triumph of some sort, and once begun it could not be allowed to simply unravel.<sup>101</sup>

## **9. The Sauer Revolution – 27 April 1978**

In early 1978, the Soviets had become increasingly worried that President Muhammed Daoud's crackdowns against the Afghan Communist Party (PDPA) signaled weakening relations with Moscow. The KGB believed that the Daoud regime was growing closer to Pakistan (and by extension to the U.S.). Rather than encouraging a revolution, the Soviets pressed the PDPA and Daoud to accommodate each other.<sup>102</sup> The Soviets supported the PDPA but were indifferent to an overthrow of the Daoud regime. They were shocked that their preferred leader and Party faction, Babrak Karmal and the Parchamis, were not the ones to seize control from Daoud. Muhammed Taraki and his ruthless deputy Haffizulah Amin from the rival communist Khalq faction consolidated support from the Army and overwhelmed Daoud.<sup>103</sup> The Sauer Revolution (or "April Revolution") on April 27, 1978, was more a coup d'état, albeit a bloody one, than a revolution, and it completely surprised the Soviets. The ousted Afghan President and his family were executed inside the palace, and then the 18 bodies of the royal family were buried in an unmarked gravesite in a desolate area on the eastern border of Kabul.<sup>104</sup> Taraki's new Afghan government rashly set out to transform a conservative Islamic society into a Communist state.

The violent overthrow of the Daoud regime led to broader expressions of discontent in rural Afghanistan. Undeterred, on July 1, 1978, with Taraki's approval, his deputy prime minister Amin carried out a purge of all political opposition, not only

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<sup>101</sup> Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghan Wars, Revolutions, and Insurgencies*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005); Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Richard F. Nyrop and Donald M. Seekins, eds., *Afghanistan: A Country Study* (Washington DC: Foreign Area Studies, American University, 1984).

<sup>102</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 302.

<sup>103</sup> The two factions of the Afghan Communist party were the Parchamis and the Khalq. The more hard line of the two was the Khalq. It was the Soviet Union's preference that the two would form a consensus government

<sup>104</sup> Carlotta Gall, "An Afghan Secret Revealed Brings End of an Era," *New York Times*, January 31, 2009. Accessed online on April 4, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/01/world/asia/01afghan.html?pagewanted=all>.

removing key leaders of the Parchamis faction of the PDPA from power, but also either imprisoning or executing them. The Parchamis leader (and Soviet favorite) Babrak Karmal narrowly escaped execution. The Soviets arranged for his exile to Prague, where he served as Afghan Ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

There is no evidence that the Soviets were directly involved in the overthrow of Daoud in April 1978. However, after the fall of Daoud, Moscow's objective for Afghanistan was a government in Kabul that would serve their interests and prevent the encroachment of the United States. Muhammad Taraki led the post-Daoud government, which sought to spread communism to rural areas of Afghanistan, but the tribes saw these efforts as a direct challenge to their Islamic faith. The hardline approaches adopted by Taraki and Amin fueled Islamists' direct and violent challenges against the new communist government. The Soviets, for their part, sent advisers to help consolidate the new regime. Like the British in the 19th century, the Soviets were not interested in colonizing Afghanistan. Rather, they wanted to prevent another world power, in this case the United States, from exerting their influence there.

The central thrust of civil-military relations in the Soviet Union leading up to the Sauer Revolution was, on the face of it, unremarkable: the Politburo appeared to control resources and make all important decisions. During Brezhnev's first decade in office the Soviet military establishment acquired more or less uncontested control of a very large percentage of the state's budget, and of the procurement process that investment supported. Military leaders accordingly expected to have a stronger voice in determining how their forces would be used. Political leaders ignored those expectations. That disappointment did not lead to an armed revolt over the issue of Afghanistan. But it did raise a more subtle issue, perennial in Soviet history, though scarcely unique to it, which Samuel Huntington described as the problem "not [of] armed revolt but [of] the relation of the expert to the politician."<sup>105</sup> The impending war to secure Soviet interests in Afghanistan would severely aggravate this problem. It would drive a wedge of recrimination and misunderstanding between an increasingly disoriented and frustrated

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<sup>105</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

civilian leadership and the Army's senior officers. Civilian leaders had been led to believe in the nonpareil excellence of the Soviet military. Military leaders found themselves called upon to accomplish counter-revolutionary tasks for which they, and the forces they commanded, were in fact poorly prepared doctrinally and psychologically. The military leadership had always viewed itself as the revolutionaries in all foreign political struggles. There is no evidence to suggest that the Soviet military leadership opposed the Afghan War on principle, or that, at the outset, Soviet commanders felt in any way overmatched by the adversary they were being sent to defeat. When the easy victory proved elusive, however, senior Soviet commanders came to feel more and more isolated from their civilian counterparts. They saw themselves as under-consulted and underappreciated instruments of a policy that, in their eyes, could be no more than a diversion from the military's primary mission: to defend the USSR against the formidable and unrelenting challenge of the West.

For the Soviets in Afghanistan, the disabling issue was not so much that the politicians and the military experts disagreed about what to do, but that they could not trust each other once the going proved tougher than either had foreseen. The roots of that distrust extended far back to the Soviet Union's origins. It is difficult, even in retrospect, to see any realistic way that such distrust could have been ameliorated while the Afghan war was still under way. A quick victory, or at any rate a quick exit, might have allowed the ever-deepening rift between the Soviet civilian and military leadership to heal, or at least to scab over, as it had in the past. As the war dragged on, however, the corrosive effects of civil-military distrust just got worse. They were aggravated, as the next chapter will discuss, by recurring instability at the very top of the Soviet state, where a rapid succession of new leaders would be confronted with the interlocking problems of how to win the war, keep the Soviet economy above water, and retain sufficient confidence among the uniformed military to carry on a war that nobody seemed to know how to win.

#### **IV. GETTING IN: LEONID BREZHNEV AND THE SOVIET DECISION TO INVADE AFGHANISTAN**

It is always tempting to arrange diverse Soviet moves into a grand design. The more esoteric brands of Kremlinology often purport to see each and every move as part of the carefully orchestrated score in which events inexorably move to the grand finale. Experience has shown that this has rarely, if ever, been the case.

**--- Henry Kissinger, 1979**

Henry Kissinger argued that Soviet foreign policy was characterized by improvisation from the Cuban missile crisis to the invasion of Czechoslovakia.<sup>106</sup> The same can be said about the process that led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Constitutionally, the Politburo was the institution responsible for national security and foreign policy decision making. However, it was the Communist Party's General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, who decided to invade Afghanistan. He abandoned the patience and inclusiveness, which characterized his early years in office and, later in his life, kept the counsel of a group that became known as the Troika, a few very close and trusted group of advisers comprised of KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov, and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

In a spasm of nineteenth century geopolitical determinism, the Western media mistakenly believed that the Soviet goal in Afghanistan was either to obtain access to a warm-water port or to dominate oil interests in the Persian Gulf. In fact, Moscow's aim was pure cold war -- prevent Afghanistan from providing a base for American meddling in the region, or, alternatively, from succumbing to an Iran-style Islamic revolution that might contaminate the USSR's own Muslim population and potentially destabilize vast regions of the USSR. The Soviets had provided substantial foreign aid and military assistance to Afghanistan over the years, which reinforced their belief that they simply could not afford to lose the country to an Islamist revolution abetted by Washington. The Soviets did not see an independent Afghanistan as dangerous; but they expected (and

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<sup>106</sup> Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 161.



required) that it would remain a stable and friendly client state that they could protect from competing and antagonistic ideological and political influences.

Historically, Afghanistan had been viewed as a buffer state in the Great Game between British and Russian imperialism. After World War II, rivalries played out there among several countries, including India, Pakistan and Iran, all of which made the state important to the Soviet Union's perception of security. There were natural ethnic ties of the peoples of the southern USSR to neighboring nations, which occasionally caused concern among Soviet leaders. Afghanistan's claim to territories in western Pakistan with the same tribal connections, sometimes called the "Pashtunistan" issue, was simmering at the time of the Afghan communist (PDPA) overthrow of the Daoud government (the Sauer Revolution) and contributed to Soviet anxieties about Pakistani encroachment. The Shi'a population in Afghanistan's Herat province felt close to their co-religionists in Iran, a country which, before the introduction of socialism in April 1978, proved worrisome, but hardly critical to Moscow. Although many regarded Afghanistan as an unconquerable land or graveyard of empires, the Soviet Union assuredly never saw it that way. Rather, Soviet leaders regarded it as highly susceptible to external influence.

Even in the aftermath of Daoud's fall, political life in Kabul attracted limited interest beyond the educated Afghan elite.<sup>107</sup> That changed when President Taraki and Amin undertook sweeping reforms, which brought an immediate backlash from rural tribes who held sway over 80% of the population.<sup>108</sup> The PDPA government's reforms included replacing the existing Islamic green flag with a communist red flag, introducing an agenda of equal rights and education for women, and instituting land redistribution and credit reform. To the majority of Afghans this indicated that Kabul was once again in the hands of self-interested rulers. There were no pilot programs to gauge tribal reaction, and the pace of implementing these reforms upset the socioeconomic structures of the

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<sup>107</sup> Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 95.

<sup>109</sup> Richard Cincotta, "Could Demography Save Afghanistan?," *Foreign Policy Magazine* (November 16, 2009), [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/11/16/could\\_demography\\_save\\_afghanistan?page=0,1](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/11/16/could_demography_save_afghanistan?page=0,1); Carl Haub, "Winds of Demographic Change in Afghanistan," *Population Reference Bureau* (2009), <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2009/afghanistan.aspx>, accessed on February 26, 2011.

rural society. Enough of the Afghan people felt compelled to rebel against these reforms to cause serious problems for the government.<sup>109</sup>

In their book, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison captured Soviet leaders' perspective on these developments:

Moscow made no secret of its dismay as Amin, disregarding Soviet advice, used his newly consolidated power to push ahead with sweeping reforms at breakneck speed....many of these Khalqi reforms were a laudable and well-intentioned response to the feudal inequities and social obscurantism of Afghan society. In Soviet eyes, however, the Khalqi moves were ill prepared, much too ambitious, and certain to provoke bitter opposition from rural vested interests, stoking fires of a nascent insurgency that would be exploited by Pakistan and the United States to destabilize the new regime.<sup>110</sup>

Under Taraki and Amin, the revolutionary movement became obsessively suspicious and acted upon those suspicions by unleashing a cycle of violence and repression.<sup>111</sup> This government-sponsored violence fueled the crisis. Prior to the Soviet invasion, many distinguished local leaders, including mullahs and landowners, were arrested and executed without trial. Their disappearances fomented discontent among the rural population and increased their willingness to take up arms.<sup>112</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro suggests that the strategy of authoritarian mobilization of the population could not compensate for the fundamental illegitimacy of the communists in the eyes of much of the population. In *Revolution Unending*, he explains that official atheism isolated the regime from Afghanistan's deeply Islamic culture and hence prevented it from developing any credibility with the population, which not surprisingly sided with the

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<sup>109</sup> Goodson, 56.

<sup>110</sup> Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 30–31; Beverley Male, *Revolutionary Afghanistan: A Reappraisal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

<sup>111</sup> Dorronsoro, 96.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

Islamist movement. Soviet leaders, prior to the invasion, did not understand that religious legitimacy was a determining condition for popular acceptance.<sup>113</sup>

This shortcoming was only part of a larger Soviet failure to decipher Afghanistan's political, strategic and cultural landscape. The pace of the Saur Revolution shocked the Soviet leadership and foreign-policy experts. Soviet leaders were as surprised as the Afghan population by the PDPA's dramatic reforms. They did not prompt the revolution and were utterly unprepared to deal with its consequences. But they could not respond with equanimity. The proximity of Afghanistan to Soviet borders made the Soviet leaders view this revolution differently from revolutionary movements in more remote countries. The Soviets saw Afghanistan as within their sphere of interest. They had to stabilize a teetering Khalq regime and, in the process, they also had to prevent the United States from taking advantage of the chaos to install an anti-Soviet regime in its place.<sup>114</sup>

For rural Afghans, a new coalition of Islamic insurgents attracted broad allegiance, not the Communist intellectuals Taraki and Amin. The Islamic resistance sought a mass response within Afghan rural society, which it hoped would create an opportunity to seize power from the Afghan Communists. In ideological terms, Islam provided the essential cultural cohesion for Afghan society, defining a shared understanding of both the past and the future.<sup>115</sup> As in the rest of the Muslim world, Afghanistan was not an environment receptive to Communism, which basically sought to fill an ideological space that was already occupied by a very well established religious tradition.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>114</sup> V. M. Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 259. Beverly Male suggests in *Revolutionary Afghanistan* that after backing the loser in an internecine Afghan Communist power struggle, Brezhnev then mistakenly viewed the alienated victor, following Muhammad Taraki's assassination, Hafizullah Amin, as a potential Tito who was plotting with the U.S., Pakistan, and China to establish an anti-Soviet regime.

<sup>115</sup> M. Nazif Shahrani, "The Future of the State and the Structure of Community Governance in Afghanistan," in *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban*, ed. William Maley (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 212–42.

On December 15, 1978, both Taraki and Amin visited Moscow to seek increases in Soviet aid and weaponry. The two leaders also discussed their host's concerns about how the new Afghan policies were creating animosity. The minutes of a Politburo meeting outline the distribution plan for the forthcoming aid:

The directive states....(that the Soviet Politburo) decided to provide assistance to strengthen the Afghan armed forces on exclusively preferential conditions...Next it states that the Soviet government adopted a decision to grant the request of the Afghan side to send to Kabul all military advisers intended to work with the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan at the expense of the Soviet side.<sup>116</sup>

These minutes show that the Politburo was committed from the start to providing military aid to the Communist Afghan government and advisory expertise to build its army. Indeed, after the Moscow meeting, the Soviets committed an extraordinary amount of military and development funding to Afghanistan. However, in the following months there was little evidence that the new regime did anything to strengthen its position in the rural provinces. Evidence mounted to suggest that the Khalq regime might not be firmly in control of the country.<sup>117</sup>

Developments west of Afghanistan were also disconcerting to the Politburo. The fall of the Daoud regime coincided with the onset of revolution in Iran, which would end in the overthrow of the Shah. Islamist success in Iran, coupled with rising discontent in the rural areas of Afghanistan, inspired disaffected Afghans to overthrow the Taraki regime in the same way. The Soviets tried to counsel Taraki and Amin about what they should do to stabilize the country. It soon became clear that they were on a fool's errand.

## **A. THE HERAT REBELLION**

Even with the robust Soviet advisory and aid package, the Afghan state was unable to control the deteriorating situation. In March 1979, Afghanistan's Communist

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<sup>116</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 07 January 1979, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC, file 89-14-41, fond 89, reel 1.993, Opisi 14, File 24, Excerpt from protocol #137 of meeting addressing the question of the Ministry of Defense and the State committee of the USSR on external economic ties (1. Approve draft orders of the USSR Council of Ministers on this question; 2. Ratify the draft directive for the Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan), 1-4.

<sup>117</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 308.

regime was wracked with dissension while the Muslim clergy was openly criticizing its policies. The Afghan army could not quell dissent in the provinces, and the Islamic resistance gathered momentum. Defections from the Afghan army grew and casualties among Soviet advisers mounted.<sup>118</sup> Soviets became the favorite targets of insurgents, especially in the western province of Herat, where 276 advisers and their family members were brutally killed in early March.<sup>119</sup> The violence and tenacity of the Islamic resistance shocked Moscow and evoked the massacres of earlier Afghan Wars as Afghan rebels tortured Soviet advisers, paraded their bodies through the streets, and killed women and children without compunction. The Soviets responded with punitive airstrikes that left up to 24,000 Afghans dead, and left an ancient and historic city a smoldering ruin.<sup>120</sup>

In light of the Herat attacks, the Soviets sent General Ivan Pavlovsky, Deputy Defense Minister and commander of Soviet ground forces, to evaluate the situation on the ground. Pavlovsky quickly concluded that the Afghan government had lost control of the country. He recommended that the Soviets try to slow the Islamic insurgency by appeasing the opposition in any way necessary. Vasily Safronchuk, a seasoned Soviet diplomat who, as counselor to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, had grappled with the Afghan relationship during the rule of King Zahir Shah, then urged Taraki and Amin to temper their radical policies by broadening the political base of the Communist government. The duo ignored the diplomat's advice.<sup>121</sup>

In response to the violence in Herat and to President Taraki's urgent appeals for Soviet ground troops, the Politburo feverishly debated the pros and cons of military intervention from March 17–19. All the Politburo members believed that if Soviet troops were deployed, they would soon find themselves fighting a broad cross-section of Afghans. Minutes from this three-day meeting reveal a growing reluctance to take such radical action. To understand what is so significant about this reluctance requires first an

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 74–75.

<sup>119</sup> A.Z. Hilali, "The Soviet Decision Making for Intervention in Afghanistan and Its Motives," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* Vol. 16, no. 2 (2003): 114.

<sup>120</sup> Vadim Zagladin, interview with Selig Harrison, Moscow, April 3, 1989; Harrison and Cordova, *Out of Afghanistan*, 36.

<sup>121</sup> Hilali, "The Soviet Decision Making for Intervention," 114.

appreciation of how the Politburo worked, followed by selected highlights from the meetings.

### **1. The Politburo Decision-Making Process**

Historically, the leadership made decisions, while specialists participated in policy discussions under the aegis of the Party's Central Committee. Although there was minimal debate at the large plenary sessions of the Central Committee, a trend established under Stalin, more serious and urgent policies were almost always unveiled at these sessions. At the time that Brezhnev decided to invade Afghanistan, there were 287 voting members of the Central Committee and 139 nonvoting members.<sup>122</sup> The Politburo not only informed the Central Committee members about their deliberations and decisions, but also tried to elicit their views informally. Brezhnev suggested that he regularly read papers sent from Central Committee members with "great attention."<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, the frequency, length, and agenda of sessions suggest that the Central Committee played only a minor role in Soviet decision making during Brezhnev's rule.

In fact, the real decision-making body for national security and military issues was the Politburo, which had served as the true cabinet for the General Secretary since the earliest days of the Soviet Union.<sup>124</sup> Over the years, and particularly during Brezhnev's tenure, the complexion of this decision-making body changed dramatically, particularly in terms of age. The average age of voting Politburo members in 1966 was 58. One year before the invasion of Afghanistan the average age of Politburo members was 67.<sup>125</sup> This increase in age, reflecting a lack of turnover, has come to symbolize the stagnation of the Brezhnev era. By the 1970s, the Politburo had fewer representatives

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<sup>122</sup> Jerry F. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union Is Governed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 457.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 465; and Seweryn Bialer "Domestic and International Factors in the Formation of Gorbachev's Reforms" in Alexander Dallin and Gail W. Lapidus, Eds. *The Soviet System: From Crisis to Collapse* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1995), 35.

<sup>124</sup> Hough and Fainsod, 466.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 467.

from the outlying Soviet republics than in the past,<sup>126</sup> and 71% of the voting members were Russian.<sup>127</sup> In other words, the longer Brezhnev stayed in power, the more the Politburo looked like him: old, increasingly frail, and Russian.

Brezhnev publicly declared that he met regularly with the Politburo, normally on Thursdays, for three to six hours.<sup>128</sup> The agenda for these meetings was always secret, and Brezhnev said that he and the Politburo only considered the most important and urgent policy questions, both domestic and international.<sup>129</sup> Officials of the Central Committee prepared materials for discussions at Politburo sessions, and both bodies worked together to provide a sub-cabinet staffing function when the Politburo had to make decisions. Western reporters often questioned Politburo members about whether they voted on decisions. Brezhnev claimed that they seldom took votes and reached consensus on most issues. In 1973, Brezhnev commented that they reached consensus “99.99% of the time.”<sup>130</sup> It goes without saying that such an achievement, if true, reflects either an astonishingly high level of top-down persuasiveness or a great willingness on Brezhnev’s part to assume that everyone else in the room agreed with him.

Until Stalin’s death in 1953, Soviet decision making adhered to a totalitarian model. That is, one strong leader (the General Secretary) dominated both the Party and society, driving both toward his chosen objectives. After Stalin’s death, General Secretaries enjoyed varying levels of power and control, but there was never again the same environment of brutality and fear. Compromise and consensus became increasingly important features of policy discussions. After Stalin, General Secretaries frequently eschewed a formal process for major decisions and relied instead on an informal set, or

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<sup>126</sup> In 1977 there were one each Ukrainian, Belorussian, Kazakh, and Latvian voting members, while five of the candidate members were Russian, one Belorussian, one Uzbek, and one Azerbaidzhani (three Ukrainians were removed)

<sup>127</sup> Hough and Fainsod, 468.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 470. This assertion about the frequency of the meetings is generally confirmed by the report that the Politburo met 215 times in the five years between the Twenty-Fourth Congress in 1971 and the Twenty-Fifth Congress in 1976.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 471.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 472.

“inner circle,” of trusted advisers,<sup>131</sup> and this was certainly the case with respect to the invasion of Afghanistan.

The Politburo also occasionally functioned on an ad hoc basis, involving only those of its members who had a need to know. Typically, the Central Committee would convene a plenary session to garner support for difficult decisions and to discuss important developments, such as occurred shortly after the Sauer Revolution in 1978. Political and military officials from the Central Committee attended these meetings, led by key members of the Politburo.

By 1979, Brezhnev’s power was largely unchallenged. His assignment of senior officials typically reflected his preference for gradualism and incrementalism. At least for routine matters, Brezhnev worked within the system of committee politics and included all appropriate officials in developing policy. However, he tended not to seek broad feedback, particularly late in his life, about decisions involving armed intervention.<sup>132</sup> When the prospect of such a non-routine intervention in Afghanistan was first considered in March 1979, Brezhnev’s preference for gradualism was on full display.

## **2. Reaching the Decision Not to Intervene after the Herat Rebellion**

The Herat rebellion so clearly demonstrated that Afghan President Taraki and his government had lost control of their country that it prompted immediate consideration of invasion. The Soviet Union had already directed punitive air strikes that had resulted in tremendous carnage. It was apparent to many members of the CPSU who knew Soviet advisers killed by Afghan revolutionaries and were simply appalled by the barbaric nature of the killings that the next logical step might be military intervention. But the downsides to intervention also required consideration. The Politburo thus weighed its options over three days in March 1979.

### ***a. Meeting, Day 1– March 17***

In addition to Brezhnev and his Troika, the primary players in these early discussions were Central Committee Secretary Andrei Kirilenko, Prime Minister Alexei

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<sup>131</sup> Collins, 100–101.

<sup>132</sup> Hough and Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union Is Governed*, 475–76.



Kosygin, and CPSU International Department head Boris Ponomarev. At the outset, there was considerable willingness and even a sense of urgency to commit ground forces to Afghanistan. The consensus was that under no circumstances could the Soviet Union surrender 60 years' worth of investments to the Afghan insurgency:

**KIRILENKO:** Leonid Il'yich (Brezhnev) instructed to begin the Politburo today at an odd hour, and he will drive in tomorrow, in order to discuss the situation, which has developed. Comrades Gromyko, Andropov and Ustinov today worked on proposals, which are prepared and we have them in our hands. Let's attentively discuss this issue and draft measures, what we should do, what measures should be taken.

**GROMYKO:** Regarding military aid, Taraki said somewhat by the way .... help on the ground and from air will be required. This must be understood .... that a deployment of our troops, ground as well as air force, will be required. I think that we should first of all proceed from the main point in providing aid to Afghanistan, namely: under no circumstances must we lose Afghanistan. Already 60 years we have lived with it in peace and good-neighborliness. And if we lose Afghanistan now, it will distance itself from the Soviet Union, then this will strongly strike our policy.

**USTINOV:** We consulted with Taraki regarding throwing some units over into the regions where the rebellion appeared. He, in turn, responded that this would be difficult to agree to, because other regions are also restless. In a word, they are expecting a large deployment .... of USSR ground troops as well as air forces.

**ANDROPOV:** They are hoping that we would strike against the insurgents.

**KIRILENKO:** A question arises, with whom would our forces fight, if we deploy them there. With the insurgents, but the insurgents will be joined by a large number of religionists, these are Muslims and among them is a large number of regular people. Thus, we would have to fight largely with the people.

**KOSYGIN:** We must fight for Afghanistan, since after all for 60 years we have lived soul to soul....They are all Islamists, people of one faith, and their faith is so strong, religious fanaticism rages so much, that they may unite on this foundation. It seems to me, that we must tell Taraki and Amin directly about the mistakes they have allowed during this time. Indeed....they continue executions by shooting of people who do not agree with them, they have eliminated almost all leaders of not only the highest, but also the middle, levels of the "Parcham" party.

**USTINOV:** I consider that under no circumstances should we mix our units, in case, if we deploy them there, with the Afghan units.

**KOSYGIN:** We must form our own military units, develop a position about them and send them under special command.

**USTINOV:** We have developed two options regarding military action. The first one is that in one day we send into Afghanistan the 105 Airborne Division and move a motorized infantry regiment into Kabul, and toward the border will be pulled the 68 Motorized Division, and the 5th Motorized Rifle Division is near the border. Thus, in three days, we will be ready to send in the troops. But the political decision, which has been discussed here, must be adopted.

**KIRILENKO:** Comrade Ustinov poses the question correctly. We must stand against the insurgents. In the political document, this must also be stated clearly and precisely. Additionally, we must influence Taraki .... We cannot deploy the troops without a request on behalf of the government of Afghanistan, let Taraki know about this. And in Kosygin's conversation with Taraki this must be stated somehow directly. Additionally, it is necessary to tell Taraki, that they should change the tactics. They must not utilize on a mass scale the executions by shooting, torture, etc. The religious question has acquired a special significance for them, the treatment of religious communities, religion in general and religious figures. This is a question of big politics. And we must tell Taraki with all determination, that they should not allow any abhorrent methods. The documents must be prepared literally tomorrow. Tomorrow we will consult with Leonid Il'yich (Brezhnev), how we could do all this better.

**USTINOV:** We also have a second option, it is also developed. We are talking about deploying two divisions into Afghanistan.

**ANDROPOV:** We must adopt a draft resolution, which we are considering today....which the comrades have discussed. Regarding the political decision, it must also be prepared immediately, because the gangs are pushing in from Pakistan and Iran.

**PONOMAREV:** We will have to send about 500 persons into Afghanistan as advisers and specialists. We need all these comrades to know what to do.

**ANDROPOV:** We must develop a political decision and anticipate that, most likely, we would be tagged an aggressor, but, regardless of this, we must not under any circumstances lose Afghanistan.

**PONOMOREV:** Unfortunately, there is much we don't know about Afghanistan. It appears to me, that in conversation with Taraki all

questions must be posed, in particular, he should tell, what is the situation in the army and in the country as a whole. After all, they have a one hundred thousand strong army and with the help of our advisors this army could do a lot. Instead some meager 20,000 insurgents are winning. First of all, everything necessary must be accomplished using the Afghan armed forces, and only afterwards, when a real necessity arises, deploy our troops.

**KOSYGIN:** I think, we do need to send weaponry, but only if we become convinced that it would not get into the insurgents' hands. If their army falls apart, then, accordingly, the insurgents will appropriate this weaponry. Furthermore, the question arises, how will we address the global public opinion. All of this must be justified, that is, should we end up deploying the troops, then we must select fitting arguments, explain everything in detail. Maybe, someone from the responsible comrades should go to Afghanistan in order to clarify the situation in more detail on the ground. Possibly comrade Ustinov or comrade Ogarkov.

**USTINOV:** The matter of Afghanistan is becoming more complicated. We must now talk, it seems to me, about political actions, which we have not yet at all. And, on the other hand, the Afghan army must be used completely. I think, scarcely should I need to go to Afghanistan, I am not certain of this at all. Maybe, someone from government members should go instead....Even if one of us goes to Afghanistan, still, in a few days only, of course, one cannot figure out the situation.

**GROMYKO:** We should discuss what to do, in case of the worst case. Today the situation in Afghanistan is still not so clear for many of us. Only one thing is clear --- we must not give Afghanistan to the enemy. How to accomplish this, some thinking is needed. Perhaps, we would not have to send in the troops.

**KOSYGIN:** We all share this opinion---Afghanistan must not be given away. Hence---we must develop first of all a political document, use all political means in order to help the Afghan leadership gain a foothold, provide aid, which we have not already planned, and as an extreme measure retain the use of military action.

**ANROPOV:** It seems to me, that we must inform the Socialist countries about these activities.

**KIRILENKO:** We have been talking a lot already, comrades, our opinions are clear.<sup>133</sup>

**b. Meeting, Day 2 – March 18**

The initial drift toward intervention on Day 1 of the deliberations gradually gave way on Day 2 to the idea of increasing military aid and providing more robust training and advisory support. A critical moment came when Andropov announced his firm opposition to intervention, which prompted others to fall in line. Then, the powerful Politburo member and future General Secretary, Konstantin Chernenko, also spoke out against committing ground troops. This palpable shift in tone and outlook is probably best explained by the fact that, after the first day of meetings, the General Secretary had heard that the Politburo was inclined toward intervention. It may be that Brezhnev decided, in advance of his arrival on the third day, that intervention was the wrong course for the state and, through his closest advisors, directed the same opinion be adopted.

**KOSYGIN:** I twice contacted Taraki by phone. The situation in Herat is very complicated. If, says Taraki, the Soviet Union does not help now, then they cannot hold on. Who I asked him then supports you? Almost without thinking, Taraki responds, that almost no one supports. We don't have workers in Kabul, but there are artisans. And then again he started talking about Herat, saying that, if Herat falls, then the revolution will not be saved. And, alternatively, if it withstands, then the salvation of the revolution is assured. Taraki stated that help is necessary.

**USTINOV:** Amin, when I spoke with him, also asked to deploy troops into Herat and crush the opposition....The Afghan revolution met big hardships in its path, says Amin in conversations with me, and its salvation depends only on the Soviet Union. Afghanistan underestimated the role of Islamic religion. It is precisely to join the banners of Islam that the soldiers are switching sides, and the absolute majority, maybe with rare exceptions, are believers. That's why they are pleading for aid from us to rebuff the rebel attacks in Herat. Amin said, though very uncertainly, that they can rely on the army. But then again, just as Taraki, he asked for help.

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<sup>133</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 17–19 March 1979 (*About the Escalation of the Situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Our Possible Measures*), Document 1/1, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 25, pages 1–11.

**KIRILENKO:** Therefore, they have no guarantees regarding their own army. They are hoping for one decision, namely: for our tanks and armored vehicles.

**KOSYGIN:** We, of course, when making such a decision regarding aid, must seriously think through all the resulting consequences. This matter is very serious.

**ANDROPOV:** I, comrades, have attentively thought about this entire question and arrived at the following conclusion, that we must very seriously think through the question, in the name of what would we be deploying troops into Afghanistan. For us it is very clear, that Afghanistan is not currently ready to solve all issues in a Socialist manner. There is a huge predominance of religion there, almost complete illiteracy of the peasant population, backwardness in the economy and so on. We know Lenin's teaching about the revolutionary situation. What situation could we possibly talk about in Afghanistan, there is no such situation. Thus, I believe that we could only uphold the revolution in Afghanistan on our bayonets, and this is completely unacceptable for us. We cannot take such a risk.

**GROMYKO:** I fully support comrade Andropov's proposal about excluding such a measure as deploying our troops to Afghanistan. The army there is unreliable. Therefore, our army, which will enter Afghanistan, will be an aggressor. Against whom will it wage war? Yes, against the Afghan people first and foremost, and it will be necessary to shoot at the people. Comrade Andropov noted correctly, that the situation in Afghanistan has not ripened enough for a revolution, and everything we have done in the past few years with such hard work in terms of unwinding the international tension, arms limitations and much more---all this will be set back. Certainly, for China all this will make a good present. All the non-aligned countries will be against us. In a word, serious consequences are expected from such an action...what will we win? Afghanistan with its present government, with a backward economy, with insignificant weight in international affairs. On the other hand, we must keep in mind, that we would not be able to legally justify troop deployment. According to the U.N. Charter, a country may request aid, and we could deploy the troops if they are subject to aggression from the outside. Afghanistan was not subject to any aggression. It's their internal matter, revolutionary strife, a battle of one population group against another. Moreover, it must be said, that the Afghans are not officially requesting troops deployment. In a word, what we are dealing with here is a case, where the government of a country, as a result of serious mistakes, lost its high ground, it does not enjoy due support of the people.

**KIRILENKO:** Yesterday in Afghanistan the situation was different, and we were leaning toward, perhaps, deciding to deploy some military units. Today the situation is different, and our conversation is quite justly taking a somewhat different course, namely: we are all adhering to a position that there isn't any basis for deploying the troops.

**ANDROPOV:** Yesterday, when we were discussing this question, the Afghans were talking about troop deployment: today the situation there is different. In Herat, not only one regiment switched to the opposition, but already the entire division. As we see from today's conversation with Amin, the people do not support Taraki's government. Could our troops help them here? Tanks and armored vehicles can't rescue them in this case. I think we must directly tell Taraki about this, that we support all their actions, will provide aid, about which we agreed yesterday and today, and under no circumstances can we go for deploying troops to Afghanistan.

**KOSYGIN:** Maybe, invite him to visit us and tell him, that we are increasing aid to you, but cannot deploy troops, because they would wage war not against the army, which essentially switched to the opposition's side or is sitting out in the corners, but against the people. Our minuses will be enormous. A whole bouquet of countries will immediately oppose us. And there aren't any plusses for us here.

**ANDROPOV:** It must be said to Taraki directly, that we will support you with all means and ways, except troop deployment.

**KOSYGIN:** He should be invited to visit us and told, that we will support you with all ways and means, but will not deploy the troops.

**KIRILENKO:** After all, it was they who inflicted executions by shooting completely innocent people and they have the nerve to tell us as their exculpation, that ostensibly we under Lenin also shot people. Look what Marxists we have here. Since yesterday the matter changed. Yesterday we, as I already said were united in providing military aid, but were discussing attentively, considering various options, looking for ways other than the deployment of troops. I think, we will need to report to Leonid Il'yich (Brezhnev) about this, our point of view, invite Taraki to Moscow and tell him about everything we have agreed.

**CHERNENKO:** If we deploy troops and defeat the Afghan people, we would definitely be accused of aggression. Nowhere to retreat here.

**ANDROPOV:** Taraki should be invited to Moscow.

**KOSYGIN:** I think we should consult Leonid Il'yich (Brezhnev) now and send an airplane to Kabul without delay.

**KIRILENKO:** A conversation between Kosygin and Taraki should be conducted. If he is willing to come to Moscow, rather than stopping in Tashkent, then we should consult, maybe, Leonid Il'yich will meet with him.

**USTINOV:** We will carry out the aid measures, I suppose, as agreed yesterday.

**ALL:** Correct.

**USTINOV:** Only exclude the part about troop deployment.

**KOSYGIN:** In a word, we are not changing anything about assistance to Afghanistan, except the deployment of troops. They themselves will have to be more responsible about solving the questions of running the affairs of the state. If we are to be responsible for everything for them, defend the revolution, what will be left for them to do? Nothing.<sup>134</sup>

*c. Meeting, Day 3 – March 19*

Regardless of the extent to which Brezhnev had already influenced the shift of opinion at the second meeting, his presence at the third meeting was decisive. He made clear straight away that he was against military intervention. It is noteworthy that the Politburo reached its cautious decision without considering, and apparently being ignorant about, the distinctive geographic and tribal challenges that Afghanistan presented to an intervening force. During the meeting, the idea of closing the Afghan borders with Iran (936 kilometers) and Pakistan (2,430 kilometers) was suggested, a task far beyond the capacity of Afghan security forces. The complex terrain and tribal interactions along both undefined borders made such a measure impractical, even if the borders themselves had been much shorter.<sup>135</sup>

**BREZHNEV:** A question was posed about the direct involvement of our troops in the conflict, which arose in Afghanistan. I think that the Politburo members decided correctly, that it's not our place now to get involved in this war. It must be explained to Taraki and other Afghan comrades, that we can help them with everything necessary for conducting

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 12–17.

<sup>135</sup> Harrison and Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan*, 36. Additionally, the author has served as an infantry officer well over two years on the border with Pakistan (2005–2008) with responsibility to slow the ingress of insurgents; the terrain is mountainous, one side completely indistinguishable from the other, and tribes have a history of cross-border relationships and establishing accords.

all activities in the country. But the participation of our troops in Afghanistan could harm not only us, but also and first of all them.

**GROMYKO:** During the heat of events in Herat, (we spoke) with Amin. ... he (Amin) then directly expressed the thought that the USSR must deploy troops to Herat. It smacks of a detective novel, so unserious is the way the Afghan leaders pose such complex questions. After this, comrade Kosygin talked with Taraki, who told him, that the situation in Afghanistan is bad, and that he is also asking to send troops to Herat, along Afghanistan's border with Iran as well as with Pakistan. At some point, our advisors expressed several proposals, but they did not listen...For us, of course, it would not be possible to avoid solving the questions connected with the situation in Afghanistan. But I think, that in the future we must hold our own line, our own policy, walk our own road accounting for all peculiarities. Should we, for instance, risk such a step as troop deployment, then, of course, the plusses received would be far less, than the minuses. And we still don't know, how the Afghan army would behave. What if it won't support our measures or remains neutral, then it would turn out, that with our troops we are occupying Afghanistan. By this we would create for ourselves an incredibly difficult environment from the international politics perspective. We would then throw quite far back all that, which we have reconstructed with so much work, and first of all the détente, and the negotiations on SALT-2 would go flying... we cannot risk such an action, as the deployment of troops. By the way, it is completely incomprehensible for us, why is Afghanistan sparing Pakistan, which is clearly mixed up in the intervention against Afghanistan. Yesterday a statement by the government of Afghanistan was published, but it was insufficiently sharp.

**KOSYGIN:** Yesterday, I had to speak to Taraki twice. He says, that everything is falling apart and that the troops must be deployed: As goes Herat, goes Afghanistan. If, he says, we lose Herat, then everything is lost...They (Taraki and Amin) envision forming new units and sending them into Herat. In Taraki's opinion, all deserters dissatisfied with the new regime will then unite and march on to Kabul, and that's the end of this government. And that's why he is asking for help with the troops. I said, that I cannot answer now. We will consider this question attentively, think and then answer...It is necessary also to address Pakistan and seriously warn it about the unacceptability of intervention against Afghanistan. The same measure must be taken regarding Iran...It would be good if the border with Pakistan and Iran could be closed.

**BREZHNEV:** Letters to Pakistan and Iran must be sent today.

**USTINOV:** Yesterday morning Amin spoke with me...he started talking about Herat, in the same way as Taraki, he asked to send tanks. I told him



about the aid, which we have planned for Afghanistan by providing weaponry. He responded that this aid is good, but the most important---is to deploy the troops.

**BREZHNEV:** Their army is falling apart, and we here will have to fight in its place.

**USTINOV:** We are forming two divisions in the Turkestan military district, one division---in the Central Asian military district. Three regiments could be, literally, in Afghanistan in three hours. But I, of course, only say this in order to underscore our preparedness. I, likewise, as the other comrades, do not support the idea of deploying troops to Afghanistan.

**ANDROPOV:** First question, ...what is the crux of the matter in Afghanistan? The matter is leadership. The leadership does not know what forces support it and on what forces it could rely...I think, that we should not make a decision regarding the deployment of troops. To deploy our troops---this means to fight against the people, to crush the people, to shoot at the people. We will look like aggressors, and we cannot allow this.

**PONOMAREV:** Taraki and Amin allowed serious mistakes in dealing with the members of the “Parcham” party. Many comrades from this party were simply shot.

**BREZHNEV:** I think, that we must approve the measures, which have been developed during these days.

**ALL:** Correct.

**BREZHNEV:** Appropriate comrades must be tasked with their energetic implementation and if new questions should arise in connection with events in Afghanistan, then they should be introduced to the Politburo.

**ALL:** Correct.

**BREZHNEV:** Thus, we adopt the decision to meet Taraki in the USSR tomorrow, 20 March.

**ALL:** This is very good.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 17–19 March 1979 (*About the Escalation of the Situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Our Possible Measures*), Document 1/1, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 25, pages 18–25.

The other important player in the developing cast of decision-makers on Afghanistan was Andrei Aleksandrov-Agentov. The General Secretary's inexperience in foreign affairs led him to depend upon the savvy Aleksandrov-Agentov (who reportedly played a key role in urging Brezhnev to override the enthusiastic support of Ustinov for invasion), Gromyko, and Andropov for advice on intervention during the first day of discussions.<sup>137</sup> These three leaders, along with Ponomarev, took over the Politburo's Commission on Afghanistan, which reinforced the Troika's dominance over decision making in this arena.<sup>138</sup> Even though Ponomarev was a full member of the Afghan Commission,<sup>139</sup> he did not have the same clout as members of the Troika or enjoy the same access to Brezhnev.<sup>140</sup>

### 3. Meeting between Taraki and Brezhnev - March 20

Shortly after the third meeting, the Afghan President arrived in Moscow to discuss the Politburo's decision with Brezhnev. Taraki's clear expectation was that the Soviets would provide ground troops to help quell the insurgency. During their long and cordial meeting, Brezhnev made clear that the Soviet Union would not commit ground forces to Afghanistan. A detailed record of this meeting provides insight into Brezhnev's attitude toward Afghanistan and reveals a great deal about his ignorance regarding Taraki's challenges on the ground.<sup>141</sup>

**BREZHNEV:** As it appears to us, it is very important to broaden the base, upon which the party and state leans. Here, of foremost importance is the question of unity in your party, mutual trust, ideational-political solidarity in its ranks bottom to top....Lean upon the workers, peasants, petty and middle bourgeoisie, intelligentsia and students, the youth and progressive layers of women....in rural regions it would be expedient to

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<sup>137</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal," 49–50; and Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 234, note 9.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>139</sup> See Appendix B – Afghanistan Commission for a description of the origins and purpose of the Commission.

<sup>140</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 234, note 10.

<sup>141</sup> *Record of Conversation of L.I. Brezhnev with N.M. Taraki*, 20 March, 1979, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 25, pages 1–8.

organize committees of the poor consisting of those without land, peasants with little land and sharecroppers, with the goal of organizing resistance to the feudal and capitalist landowners.

All this by no means implies that repression should not be used in regard to those against whom there really exist serious allegations of disloyalty to the revolutionary power. But this weapon is sharp and it ought to be used rather cautiously....It appears that the subversive work, conducted by various enemies of the new regime, including by reactionary clergy (religious leaders), is far more active and far-reaching than the political work conducted by local party representatives....Certainly, appropriate work must be conducted with the clergy as well, aimed at splitting its ranks so that at least part of the clergy, even if it does not openly support the government, at least would not openly oppose it.

Now about the question, which you posed during the telephone conversation with comrade Kosygin and then here in Moscow---about the possibility of sending Soviet military units into Afghanistan. We have reviewed this question from all sides, weighed it carefully, and I will tell you directly: this should not be done. This would only play into enemies' hands---your enemies, and ours as well. You have already had a more detailed conversation on the given question with our comrades. And I would like to hope that you relate with understanding to our considerations.

What could explain that, despite the complication of the situation and the infiltration into Afghanistan of thousands of armed people from Iran and Pakistan, your borders with these countries were, in effect, open, and apparently now are not closed? I will tell you directly, we in the Soviet Union cannot ourselves allow this. This is an abnormal situation, in our opinion, and must be corrected.

Finally, I would like to underscore one more time, that in the current situation, the most important role will be played by the ability to use political and economic means to attract to your side as wide population circles as possible. The arsenal of methods used must once again be examined, and from it must be eliminated the means that may elicit legitimate alarm among the population, cause feelings of protest.

**TARAKI:** Regarding the creation of a unified national front in Afghanistan, I would like to note, that it has, in fact, been created in the form of party, Komsomol, professional union and other mass organizations, which operate under the leadership of the Peoples-Democratic party of Afghanistan. In the same form, as it exists in several other countries of the socialist community of friends, such a front cannot become firmly established in the socio-political life of Afghanistan

because of its economic backwardness and the still insufficient level of political development of some parts of its population.

The majority of Afghanistan's working people and intelligentsia correctly understand the meaning of the plans and concrete measures, directed at the socio-economic renewal of the country. Unfortunately, an insignificant number of our countrymen and our adversaries abroad currently, as frankly, previously as well, are trying to denigrate those certain successes, achieved by the new leadership after the April revolution along the path of building a future socialist society. Some of our enemies even dare to attempt to eliminate the new people's power, to return Afghanistan to the former ways of its feudal past. In such conditions, the leadership of the country cannot avoid resorting to extreme measures in relation to the specified group of individuals---the accomplices of international imperialism and reaction. Such repressive measures, employed against a range of religious representatives, Maoists and other persons, who have embarked upon the path of open struggle against the people's power, are being implemented in complete accordance with the law and no one is persecuted without lawful establishment of the guilt of the accused. These measures, moreover, apply to a rather limited number of the new regime's opponents who have shown themselves as most drastic anti-people elements.

The experiences of history provide evidence that with the fierce opponents of everything new and progressive, who have embarked upon the path of open, often armed conflict with the revolutionary gains of the people, it is necessary to act decisively and irrevocably.

As for the question of closing our borders with Iran and Pakistan, it appears rather difficult. The inability to do this is due to the absence of the necessary means. Besides, the closing of the Afghan-Pakistani border would create discontent among the Afghan and Pakistani Pushtuns and Baluchis, who maintain close family ties, and in the final result would significantly damage the prestige of the current government in Afghanistan.<sup>142</sup>

Brezhnev and Taraki clearly established a rapport during this important meeting, a rapport that became significant later in the year. President Taraki struck a patient and subordinate tone that contributed to the cordial relationship. Several of his points were tactfully aimed at educating the Soviet leader about the unique challenges in Afghanistan. He did this artfully and without telling Brezhnev directly that his suggestions were

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

foolhardy given the nature of Afghan tribal society and the country's indefensible borders.

## **B. WHAT CHANGED BETWEEN MARCH AND DECEMBER?**

Less than a month later, another meeting reviewed the worsening situation in Afghanistan. The Troika, along with Ponomarev, presented a joint report and "Ten Point Plan of Action." The ten points included measures such as strengthening the Afghan Army, extending economic support programs in rural areas, and broadening the political base of the Afghan government. President Taraki and Amin dismissed out of hand both the "Ten Point Plan of Action" and Ambassador to Afghanistan Alexander Puzanov's proposal that the Afghan president should establish a new coalition government in Kabul.<sup>143</sup> The Politburo's patience with Afghanistan's leaders subsequently grew thin. The final efforts to save Afghanistan, short of Soviet intervention, came in mid-August when General Ivan Pavlovsky again traveled to Kabul to help reorganize the Afghan Army, so it could meet the challenges posed by the resistance. By then Amin had stripped Taraki of the office of Prime Minister, assuming it himself, leaving Taraki in the more ceremonial role of President. During Pavlovsky's visit, the KGB approached Taraki and for the first time suggested that Amin's arrest was the only way to save Soviet-Afghan relations. Taraki initially resisted the idea then offered his tacit agreement. In this way, the stage was set for a shift in Afghan leadership in ways that Moscow believed would prove beneficial.<sup>144</sup>

### **1. The Collapse of Détente and Other Strategic Factors**

Interactions between Soviet and Afghan leaders took place in a shifting international context. Not only did Iran undergo a revolution in September 1979, but U.S.-Soviet relations were steadily deteriorating. That deterioration had begun in 1975 with active Soviet engagement in Angola and continued with the U.S. geostrategic

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<sup>143</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 310–311.

<sup>144</sup>A. Z. Hilali, "Afghanistan: The decline of Soviet military strategy and political status," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 1999, 97; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 394.

maneuvering in Central and Southern Asia. This added to Soviet concerns about U.S. interference in its sphere of influence. The Politburo believed that the United States had embarked on a campaign to develop greater strength around the Soviet periphery, with an aim to create “a network of military bases in the Indian Ocean and in the Middle East and Africa.”<sup>145</sup>

By the fall of 1979, the Politburo perceived the relationship with the West to be beyond repair. To the Soviets, the United States had abandoned all pretenses of evenhandedness. Three developments colored their outlook: the United States had offended the USSR by supporting Beijing in the Sino-Vietnamese war; Congress had failed to ratify SALT II after seven years of intensive negotiations; and NATO had decided to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. The Soviet leaders concluded that, at least with regard to their relations with the United States, they had little to lose by acting decisively in Afghanistan.<sup>146</sup> It was also already apparent that the half-measures adopted in March would not suffice and that Afghan leaders were not going to take the actions necessary to redress the situation on their own. If Afghanistan was to be saved, the Soviets would have to do it.

There were major misperceptions in the Soviets’ outlook. They mistakenly believed the United States sought an alternative strategic base in Afghanistan after losing Iran. They also miscalculated U.S. intentions toward Iran.<sup>147</sup> In the early fall of 1979, Soviet intelligence analysts suggested that the U.S. build-up in the Indian Ocean was a precursor to a full-scale invasion of Iran. To counter such a strategy, the Soviets wanted to secure a foothold to match the one they felt the United States was likely to acquire in Iran.<sup>148</sup> They addressed this threat by formally reaffirming the Soviet security commitment to Afghanistan. Once they moved into Afghanistan, they referred to Article 4 of their Treaty of Friendship with Afghanistan, which stated that, when necessary, both parties will “take appropriate measures with a view to ensuring the security,

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<sup>145</sup> Collins, 132.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>148</sup> Gregory Guroff and Steven Grant, “Soviet Elite’s World View and Perceptions of the U.S.,” Office of Research, U.S. International Communications Agency, R-18-81, September 29, 1981, p. 34–35.

independence, and territorial integrity of the two countries.”<sup>149</sup> This was the basis for Brezhnev’s later assertion that the invasion was a defensive measure undertaken at the request of the Afghan government.

Meanwhile, U.S. suspicions about Soviet intentions in Afghanistan were amplified by the fears of their allies in the region, principally Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. President Carter’s national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, believed that the Soviets were looking for opportunities to spread their tentacles into the Persian Gulf. From his perspective, revolutionary instability in Iran might grant the Soviets just such an opportunity. Thus, American support for the Afghan resistance could serve to tie the Soviets down short of the Soviets’ putative larger objectives.

## **2. Prelude to Invasion**

On September 9, 1979, Afghan President Taraki visited Moscow, was photographed in a well-publicized warm embrace with Brezhnev, and secured a conditional pledge of enhanced Soviet military aid for his embattled country, contingent upon his acceptance of a Soviet plan to kill Prime Minister Amin. On September 14, as part of this plan, Taraki invited Amin to the Presidential Palace, whereupon the President’s security guards immediately tried but failed to kill the prime minister. Two days later, Amin orchestrated an elaborate and bloody coup d’état and declared himself president and secretary general of the PDPA. Taraki was later executed in prison, despite repeated Soviet appeals to spare his life.

With Taraki’s death, the Soviets were finally convinced that they had no choice but to invade.<sup>150</sup> Soviet leaders and emissaries warned Amin, as they had Taraki, to share power with rivals and adopt a more moderate policy approach or else lose Moscow’s support. Amin ignored the warnings. Although he continued to press for more Soviet aid,

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<sup>149</sup> “Afghanistan and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation,” signed in Moscow on 5 December 1978, accessed online on December 4, 2010. [http://untreaty.un.org/unts/60001\\_120000/2/16/00002763.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/unts/60001_120000/2/16/00002763.pdf).

<sup>150</sup> Hilali, “Afghanistan,” 116.

he resisted all advice from Moscow.<sup>151</sup> Despite his intransigence, Ambassador Puzanov advised Moscow to accept Amin's leadership, rather than risk the ascendancy of a weaker leader at such a crucial time. For nearly two months, Moscow appeared to ignore the Taraki assassination and seemed to be on cordial terms with Amin.<sup>152</sup> But then, the new Afghan leader requested that the USSR recall Puzanov to Moscow, because he had conspired with Taraki. Following this demand by Amin, the Troika concluded that the only way forward was through force, to include his elimination.

The KGB warned the Politburo that the Amin regime planned to align itself more closely with the United States. The KGB offered a body of circumstantial evidence to back up its assessment. Later, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires to Kabul in 1979, J. Bruce Amstutz, "forcefully debunked" the myth of CIA links to Amin. Amstutz met Amin five times in the fall of 1979, which might be why the KGB thought there was collusion. However, Amstutz did not recall detecting any sense that Amin was interested in abandoning his ties with the Soviets.<sup>153</sup> The CIA's station chief did try to develop closer relations first with Taraki and then with Amin, but all these efforts failed. The Soviets were about to go to war taking counsel of their fears, rather than to eliminate an imminent threat to their interests.

### **C. THE PROCESS OF DECIDING TO INVADE AFGHANISTAN – FALL, 1979**

The earlier discussion between Taraki and Brezhnev in March 1979 reflected a fundamental disconnect between what ideologically underpinned Soviet foreign policy and what motivated the actions of their Afghan clients. From the beginning, there was very little that Soviet advisers could identify with on the ground in Afghanistan. The brutality of the Khalq faction towards the Parcham faction was inconsistent with Soviet practices after Stalin, but was fully consistent with Afghans' more violent tribal

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<sup>151</sup> Vasily Safronchuk, "Afghanistan in the Taraki Period" and "Afghanistan in the Amin Period," *International Affairs* (Moscow), (January-February 1991).

<sup>152</sup> Hilali, "Afghanistan," 117.

<sup>153</sup> Ostermann, Christian, "Introduction," "New Evidence on the War in Afghanistan," *Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) Bulletin*, no. 14–15 (Winter 2003-Spring 2004): 139.



traditions. Even so, and despite all indications that a Communist state was unsustainable in Afghanistan, Taraki and Amin convinced the Soviets that establishing a true Socialist system was possible under their leadership.<sup>154</sup>

In stark contrast to the relatively free and open discussions that marked the Politburo meetings in March, by the late fall of 1979 Aleksandrov-Agentov (Brezhnev's foreign policy adviser) had systematically silenced all arguments against intervention. For example, when one voting member of the Central Committee began to write a memorandum arguing against intervention, Aleksandrov-Agentov showed up at the official's office and asked, "So, do you suggest giving Afghanistan to the Americans?" Tellingly the materials presented to the Politburo did not include this official's memorandum.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, civilian leaders told senior military officers who tried to object to the invasion to mind their own business and "not teach the Politburo."<sup>156</sup> The Defense Minister was particularly blunt in saying so:

On 10 December Ustinov summoned Ogarkov. The Politburo had taken a decision to send 75,000 to 80,000 troops into Afghanistan. Ogarkov said this would be insufficient; it was foolhardy: rapid stabilization of Afghanistan required no less than thirty to thirty-five divisions. Ustinov responded that it was not Ogarkov's job to instruct the Politburo but to obey orders.<sup>157</sup>

Once the Troika agreed internally about how to proceed, and had secured Brezhnev's concurrence, other senior officials felt they had to accept the leadership's decision.<sup>158</sup> Those who opposed the intervention were simply not present. Aleksai Kosygin was a strong voice against intervention during the March deliberations, but was absent from the decisive Politburo meeting on December 12, when the decision to invade

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<sup>154</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 322–23.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 318. The voting member was Karen Brutens, who was then first deputy head of the CPSU International Department.

<sup>156</sup> Zubok, 262–264.

<sup>157</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 326.

<sup>158</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 50.

became official.<sup>159</sup> To be sure, some actors beyond the inner circle did make limited contributions to the decision-making process. The Troika found support for intervention among some of the more senior, and ideologically orthodox, members of the CPSU. Mikhail Suslov, the Party's informal chief ideologist, and Boris Ponomarev, the chief of the International Department of the CPSU, backed intervention on the grounds that socialism never retreats.<sup>160</sup> But basically, the invasion resulted from deliberations among a few key people inside the Politburo.

Convincing Brezhnev of the merits of invasion became progressively easier as conditions in Afghanistan deteriorated, a process that he and the people around him were inclined to attribute at least in part to American meddling. Brezhnev's primary concern was how such an invasion would affect his reputation as a world leader, and he was most persuaded by arguments that related to his stature. He regarded the assassination of Taraki as a personal affront and could not abide another. He felt that his reputation among other Socialist nations was also at stake.<sup>161</sup> Notably, too, Brezhnev's failing health further strengthened the Troika's position,<sup>162</sup> because no member of the Politburo was interested in getting into a direct conflict with any member of the General Secretary's inner circle. This was particularly true given the likelihood of a succession crisis in the near future. Among the Troika, it seems to have been Andropov who played the decisive role in finally bringing Brezhnev around to an intervention. The key was a carefully constructed memorandum he wrote.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Zubok, 262–264.

<sup>160</sup> Fred Halliday, "Soviet Foreign Policymaking and the Afghanistan War: From 'Second Mongolia' to 'Bleeding Wound'," *Review of International Studies*, Vol 25, No. 4 (October 1999), 678–79.

<sup>161</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 321.

<sup>162</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 48.

<sup>163</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Malcolm Byrne, ed., "Dean of Washington's Diplomatic Corps, Eyewitness to the Superpower Rivalry, and Advocate for Opening Up the History of the Cold War," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 313*, posted April 14, 2010, accessed online on May 10, 2010. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB313/index.htm>. Anatoly Dobrynin (former Soviet Ambassador to the United States who served five Soviet leaders and dealt with six U.S. Presidents, beginning in 1962) gained access to the Russian Presidential Archive and was permitted to take notes of the document, which he then presented to an international conference in Norway in 1994.

**1. Personal Memorandum from Yuri Andropov to Leonid Brezhnev, early December 1979**

After the coup and the murder of Taraki in September of this year, the situation in Afghanistan began to undertake an undesirable turn for us. The situation in the party, the army and the government apparatus has become more acute, as they were essentially destroyed as a result of the mass repressions carried out by Amin.

At the same time, alarming information started to arrive about Amin's secret activities, forewarning of a possible political shift to the West. [These included:] Contacts with an American agent about issues which are kept secret from us. Promises to tribal leaders to shift away from USSR and to adopt a 'policy of neutrality.' Closed meetings in which attacks were made against Soviet policy and the activities of our specialists. The practical removal of our headquarters in Kabul, etc. The diplomatic circles in Kabul are widely talking of Amin's differences with Moscow and his possible anti-Soviet steps.

All this has created, on the one hand, the danger of losing the gains made by the April [1978] revolution (the scale of insurgent attacks will increase by spring) within the country, while on the other hand--- the threat to our positions in Afghanistan (right now there is no guarantee that Amin, in order to protect his personal power, will not shift to the West). [There has been] a growth of anti-Soviet sentiments within the population.

Recently we were contacted by group of Afghan communists abroad. In the course of our contact with Babrak [Karmal] and [Asadullah] Sarwari, it became clear (and they informed us of this) that they have worked out a plan for opposing Amin and creating new party and state organs. But Amin, as a preventive measure, has begun mass arrests of 'suspect persons' (300 people have been shot).

In these conditions, Babrak and Sarwari, without changing their plans of opposition, have raised the question of possible assistance, in case of need, including military.

We have two battalions stationed in Kabul and there is the capability of rendering such assistance. It appears that this is entirely sufficient for a successful operation. But, as a precautionary measure in the event of unforeseen complications, it would be wise to have a military group close to the border. In case of the deployment of military forces we could at the same time decide various questions pertaining to the liquidation of gangs.

The implementation of the given operation would allow us to decide the question of defending the gains of the April revolution, establishing

Leninist principles in the party and state leadership of Afghanistan, and securing our positions in this country.<sup>164</sup>

In addition to this memorandum, according to one account, Brezhnev concluded his approval for the invasion (and Amin's removal) by muttering the words *neporyadichnii chelovek* ("indecent person"), then slowly shuffling out of his office grumbling to himself.<sup>165</sup> What apparently made Amin indecent in Brezhnev's mind was the murder of Taraki.

#### **D. WHY THE SOVIETS INVADED**

Decision-making about interventions abroad was controversial in the Brezhnev era, much to the General Secretary's chagrin. For this reason Brezhnev gradually grew more dependent on his inner circle and began cloaking his decisions in secrecy.<sup>166</sup> The Czechoslovakian crisis of 1968, the first crisis of Brezhnev's tenure, created serious divisions among senior Soviet leaders. Five years later, during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Brezhnev successfully prevented such divisions by limiting discussions to a much smaller circle. He withstood complaints, particularly from the rising generation of Soviet officers and bureaucrats that the USSR could not appear to back down in the face of an American threat. The Soviets did not intervene directly in the Yom Kippur War, though they did provide significant support to Egypt and Syria. By the late 1970s, the Soviets had developed a successful pattern of intervention, as evidenced in Vietnam, Angola, and Ethiopia. This appears to have strengthened their confidence that they had correctly taken the measure of brushfire wars and knew how to proceed when such crises arose.

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<sup>164</sup> CWIHP Virtual Archive:

([http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034DB5A-96B6-175C-9D886C24443BD2D4&sort=Collection&item=Soviet%20Invasion%20of%20Afghanistan](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034DB5A-96B6-175C-9D886C24443BD2D4&sort=Collection&item=Soviet%20Invasion%20of%20Afghanistan)). Original Source: Archive of the President of the Russian Federation, from notes taken by A.F. Dobrynin and provided to the Norwegian Nobel Institute; provided to CWIHP by Odd Arne Westad, Director of Research, Nobel Institute; translated for CWIHP by Daniel Rozas.

<sup>165</sup> Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1983–1990* (Crofton: Poseidon Press, 1991), 236–237.

<sup>166</sup> In 1968, Brezhnev ordered the invasion of Czechoslovakia after hearing from all sides of the Central Committee on the subject and feeling the pressure to act. In 1973, he narrowly rejected military intervention in the Yom Kippur War, because the United States threatened counterintervention and the more exclusive Politburo counseled caution.

After the Sauer Revolution, Soviet leaders envisaged that Afghanistan would become a model satellite state for the USSR. Instead, it had become unstable, so much so that Brezhnev and the Politburo firmly believed they needed to act to prevent the United States from taking advantage of the chaos to usurp them. In effect, the breakdown in détente between the two superpowers ignited a new Great Game. This degradation of the relations with the United States helps explain each of the reasons for Soviet intervention.

First, the failure of the U.S. Congress to ratify SALT II heralded a turning away from détente by the United States. Further, the anticipated U.S. decision to deploy Pershing II missiles in Europe confirmed to the Soviet Union that the United States' disposition was aggressive. These actions suggested that the Soviets had little to lose by taking strong action in Afghanistan. Second, Taraki's assassination helped convince Brezhnev that Amin had to go, both because his actions seemed to jeopardize the stabilization of one of the USSR's near neighbors and because his seizure of power involved the murder of a man Brezhnev personally liked and had done business with (and been photographed with just two weeks prior to his assassination). Third, the suspicion that Amin was turning toward the United States suggested to the Soviets that inaction might lead to a Western-oriented Afghanistan, which could serve as a potential base for intermediate-range nuclear missiles aimed at the Soviet Union.

December 12th was an important day for the Soviet Union, not just because it was the day that the Politburo formally decided to invade, but because it was also the day the U.S. announced it was deploying Pershing missiles into Europe. NATO's acceptance of Pershing missiles in Western Europe validated the belief of Ustinov and Andropov that similar intermediate-range missiles could be deployed to Afghanistan.

From the Soviet perspective, the hostages in Iran provided the United States with the perfect pretext for moving into the theater in full force. By failing to act the Soviet Union would lose all the influence they had worked so hard to acquire since 1919.<sup>167</sup> As Andropov stated at Day 1 deliberations in March, "we must not under any circumstances lose Afghanistan." By December, it seemed clear to Brezhnev and his inner circle that if

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<sup>167</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2009), 234.

they failed to act, Afghanistan would be lost. The Troika also convinced Brezhnev that his goal of quickly establishing genuine Communist institutions in Afghanistan and then leaving was possible.<sup>168</sup> The Soviet leaders did not anticipate that the invasion would unduly burden its military given the Army's considerable capabilities (indeed Andropov suggested it would only take two battalions and a potential deployment of forces to "liquidate gangs."). Between the spring and fall of 1979, the Troika discounted and set aside the only risks they foresaw, which they deemed to be political and reputational. The amount of force they planned to commit was very low relative to what was available, or when compared to what they had used to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968.<sup>169</sup> The Soviets believed that they could easily achieve in Afghanistan what they had accomplished in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The Troika did take several steps to assure that the decision appeared unanimous among the ruling elite---out of force of habit, perhaps, but also suggesting that they realized that any decision to use the army might have serious consequences, from which no one could be allowed to beg off. In the days and months following the decision, all the other Politburo members were encouraged to support the General Secretary's decision, until finally on June 23, 1980 a special CPSU Central Committee plenum<sup>170</sup> conferred official Party approval on Brezhnev's order.<sup>171</sup>

Ultimately, we can say that the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan centered on political risk, not military difficulty. The decision focused on political instability in Afghanistan, and the threat posed by it did not deviate too far from Communist norms. Inclusive policy discussions among civilian and military leaders might have helped the Soviets to understand the tremendous difficulties associated with invading the country, and possibly could have led to an increased commitment of forces at the outset. However, narrow input by military experts and Afghanistan hands prior to the ultimate decision prevented not only thorough consideration of whether the invasion was necessary, but

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<sup>168</sup> Rubin, 121.

<sup>169</sup> Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 113.

<sup>170</sup> A CPSU Central Committee plenum was an assembly of all prominent Communist Party members, similar to what in Western parlance would be a Joint Session of Congress, in so far as no decisions are made at such gatherings. The ceremonial and symbolic nature of the assembly was very significant.

<sup>171</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-making," footnote 7, 48-49.

also discussion about the longer-term consequences of intervention. By late 1979, the Troika did not want to suffer through further deliberations or deal with the inconvenient military truths about the difficulties associated with an invasion. They simply wanted to get on with it and be rid of Amin.

## **E. THE INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN**

The 1979 decision to invade Afghanistan to prevent the destruction of a Socialist-oriented regime did signify a broad change in Soviet foreign policy. The Soviet leaders' need to act was so great that they would probably have invaded even if they had given deep consideration to the resistance they would encounter. The Soviet invasion was not part of a calculated ploy to destabilize the Persian Gulf or Central Asia, but the culmination of actions designed to meet the immediate crisis.<sup>172</sup>

The objective of the invasion was to ensure the new Afghan communist government (PDPA) got off to the right start, after which Soviet forces would leave without having to militarily confront the Islamic opposition. The Troika planned to accomplish this by ousting Amin, putting Babrak Karmal in power, and providing advice and assistance that would consolidate Communism in accordance with the Brezhnev doctrine.<sup>173</sup> The invasion plan included both overt and covert elements and initially only required assets already in place near the Afghan frontier. The PDPA government requested the overt deployment of four divisions of armored troops. The covert element focused on Amin's removal and Karmal's installation.<sup>174</sup> Karmal flew to Bagram early in December in anticipation of a smooth and bloodless transition to power. Once he was established, the intention was to develop a coalition government that would unite the Parcham and Khalq factions of the PDPA.

When it became clear that the transition of power would not be bloodless, the plan was modified to include 750 KGB Special-Unit (Spetsnaz) soldiers designated to storm

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<sup>172</sup> Collins, 123–136.

<sup>173</sup> The doctrine stipulated that when a country was to transition from a socialist (communist) government to a capitalist one (democracy), it concerned all socialist countries, not only the affected country.

<sup>174</sup> Halliday, 677.

the presidential palace while three divisions would drive south into Afghanistan.<sup>175</sup> Using the invasion of Czechoslovakia as a guide, the Soviets calculated that the occupation of Afghanistan would take only a few months.<sup>176</sup> This was Brezhnev's clear expectation when he made the decision to invade.

On December 18, command and control forces began to deploy to Bagram airbase in order to prepare for the invasion on Christmas day. Two divisions moved directly south to seize Kabul, then turned west to seize Shindand airfield. Another two divisions crossed the border and maintained their positions near the Salang tunnel in the north. The attack on Amin's residence came two days later, when he was killed following a disorganized Soviet confrontation with the Afghan palace guard. Babrak Karmal then proclaimed himself Prime Minister and General Secretary of the PDPA. The Soviets forced Karmal to release most of Amin's supporters and pressed him to appoint several of them to very senior positions in his new government. This way they would establish the type of coalition government that the Soviets had long wanted, but that Taraki and Amin had rejected. Although the international outcry over the invasion was immediate, the Politburo and Soviet General Secretary considered their action to be defensive and not offensive in nature.

In retrospect, it seems likely that nothing could have averted military action once Amin ordered President Taraki's execution. The Soviets targeted Amin for removal and this, together with the Politburo's determination not to lose Afghanistan, made the Soviet invasion virtually inevitable—it is difficult, at any rate, to think of any individual or entity that was in a position to raise effective objections and possessed the courage to do so. In order for the Troika to set the plan in motion, it only needed the approval of an already insulted and angry Brezhnev. Tellingly, the orders to move four armored divisions (significantly more than Andropov suggested would be necessary in his memorandum to Brezhnev) from the Central Asian states had already been issued when

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<sup>175</sup> Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 64–65.

<sup>176</sup> Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 134–35.



the Politburo met to approve the operation. Karmal was sitting in Bagram nearly two weeks in advance of the Politburo's official approval of the invasion.

It is worth recalling that there were thirteen documented requests from Afghan leaders for direct Soviet military intercession following the Saur Revolution. There is, thus, some irony in the fact that, having failed to heed any of these requests, the Soviets ended up invading the country unilaterally, murdering a leader who had sought their help and taking control of the entire country by force. Whatever apprehensions might have been voiced by Soviet military leaders, the country's political leaders ultimately felt compelled to confront a situation they had convinced themselves was spiraling out of control. As might have been expected, the invasion itself accelerated the spiral.<sup>177</sup> In retrospect, what is sadly ironic is that the United States remained committed to détente despite Soviet perceptions to the contrary; Amin had not turned away from the Soviets; and there was simply no prospect of a military threat from the West emerging on the Soviets' southern border. It is hard to say whether broader and more intensive consultations with Soviets who understood the situation would have enhanced the Troika's appreciation of these facts. The Troika and Brezhnev acted less out of blind ignorance than in accord with their own perverse evaluation of the facts. At the very least, more extensive consultation would have aided in the execution of the operation itself. Essentially, because the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan occurred behind closed doors, it came as a surprise to most Soviet civilian and military officials, as well as to the rest of the world. This did nothing to improve anyone's performance, or build Party confidence in the state's leaders as they embarked on what would soon prove to be a very tough fight.

Well before the invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet political analysts had concluded that assisting states with socialist orientations was a national duty. Earlier successes in this sphere seem to have caused the Soviets to overestimate both the value of what their interventions had achieved and the ease and efficiency with which effective assistance could be provided. It accordingly contributed to their underestimation of the risks of

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<sup>177</sup> Georgi Arbatov, *The System: An Insider's Life in Soviet Politics* (Pittsburgh: Three Rivers Press, 1993), 230.

intervention in Afghanistan.<sup>178</sup> The Soviets simply took for granted that they would succeed in Afghanistan. After the decision was made to invade Afghanistan, there was very little consideration given to what would follow. The idea of a protracted war never occurred to the Troika and certainly was not something that Brezhnev even considered. Politburo members well understood that they would have to do as Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin had suggested during March deliberations over military intervention, which was to “address global public opinion, select fitting arguments and explain everything in detail.”<sup>179</sup> As will be examined in the next chapter, this challenge proved far more complex than the Politburo anticipated. After less than a year on the ground in Afghanistan, the members of the Politburo would come to realize how right Constantin Chernenko had been during their March 1979 deliberations, there was nowhere to retreat.

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<sup>178</sup> Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 111.

<sup>179</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 17–19 March 1979 (*About the Escalation of the Situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Our Possible Measures*), Document 1/1, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 25, pages 3–5.

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## **V. NO RETREAT...NO MIRACLES: BREZHNEV, ANDROPOV AND CHERNENKO IN AFGHANISTAN (1980 – 1985)**

In December 1979 we learned from the newspapers that Soviet troops had invaded Afghanistan and hastened to meet to discuss it. We agreed it was a fatal error that would cost the country dearly.<sup>180</sup>

**—Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikhail Gorbachev,  
on learning of the Afghan invasion**

The fact that the planning and execution of the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was so secret that even members of the Politburo like Shevardnadze and Gorbachev were taken completely by surprise constitutes one of the more startling aspects of policy-making and civil-military relations in the Soviet Union's declining years. There are several reasons why this may have been so: one is that the invasion of Afghanistan, modeled after that of Czechoslovakia in 1968, had become practically an automatic policy response that required minimal prior consultation. The propaganda costs of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia were more than compensated for by the relatively rapid stabilization of those two countries that had helped stifle potential dissent in other Soviet satellites. Washington's reaction had been limited to verbal denunciations, a sure indication that the United States clearly had no intention of intervening in the Soviet sphere of influence. Both invasions involved intricate deception and secrecy, which had discouraged broadening the circle of those in the know. Military force was considered essential to remove what were perceived in Moscow to be ineffective communist regimes, in order to install a more reliable government.<sup>181</sup> So, invasion was perceived to be an automatic response, one invariably crowned by success. There was also recent memory of three days of hand wringing in March of that year that definitively identified the many reasons not to invade Afghanistan. It may well have been that Brezhnev and his Troika did not want to be talked out of taking action.

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<sup>180</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze, *The Future Belongs to Freedom* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>181</sup> Collins, 77.

Of course, Afghanistan was more primitive, more in need of tutelage, than were the satellite states in central Europe. But even there, Babrak Karmal's regime was bolstered by a host of Soviet bureaucrats, teachers, technicians and secret police, all focused on quickly establishing the new regime. Only days after the December 25, 1979 invasion a first wave of administrative support in the form of 4,000 civilian administrators arrived Kabul. They were tasked with replicating Prague among the Pashtuns. So successful did the invasion seem that the majority of KGB and Soviet Special Forces (Spetsnaz) withdrew to Moscow by January 7th.<sup>182</sup>

Soviet military leaders opposed intervention in Afghanistan from the start. The principal issue for the generals was not whether or not success could be achieved, but instead that the invasion was a diversion from what they saw as the primary threat to their interests---the United States. A month before the invasion, General Ogarkov confronted Ustinov in his office and passionately made the case to reconsider military intervention. Ogarkov had previously offered his assessment to the Troika that it would require no less than thirty divisions to stabilize Afghanistan. This inconvenient assessment made the meeting in Ustinov's office a chilly one. It was during their conversation that the General was cut off abruptly by the Defense Minister with a phrase that came to define the civil-military divide over Afghanistan, "Don't teach the Politburo!"<sup>183</sup> Ustinov's summary dismissal of Ogarkov was essentially a dismissal of military expertise. The military strategists who had considered what was required in order to carry out a successful military intervention concluded that six divisions were required. When the intervention plan was reviewed in December, the Politburo decided to send only four divisions in an effort to ensure the military contingent was limited.<sup>184</sup>

As already noted, the civil-military divide in the Soviet Union did not begin with the decision to invade Afghanistan, but the negative impact of the decision was undeniable. Marshal Ogarkov and most other senior officers around him thought that the invasion would siphon resources from dramatically more important priorities like

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<sup>182</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 15.

<sup>183</sup> Zubok, 264.

<sup>184</sup> Braithwaite, 54.

preparing for war with the West. The Politburo nonetheless viewed generals as obedient underlings who should carry out their orders without questioning and then deliver a quick victory.

## **A. STRATEGIC FOUNDATION**

Throughout the subsequent ten years of the Afghanistan war, shifts in Soviet strategy corresponded to changes in leadership in Moscow. It is difficult to discern precisely what produced these shifts, as in this author's view the evidence suggests that there was a significant disconnect between the Politburo's political direction and the use of military power on the ground. That said, both before and during the conflict, Soviet Party leaders were determined to limit the number of troops committed to the war.<sup>185</sup> Regardless of results or resistance, the first three General Secretaries who oversaw the war followed similar policies, but their short tenures prevented momentum from developing toward resolving the war. Although the policies were indeed similar, in the minds of each General Secretary the war in Afghanistan was their "new" problem to resolve as the country's new leader. In effect, they started over again three different times. Consequently, Soviet succession politics provide a general outline of the war.

Brezhnev underestimated the nature of Afghan resistance from the outset. Brezhnev's successor for fifteen months from 1982, Andropov grew increasingly impatient with his generals' inability to defeat the resistance, which led to an escalation of the war's intensity. He had previously hoped to parley military success into diplomatic advantage but this proved elusive. During his thirteen months in office in 1984–85, Chernenko showed little interest in following through on any of Andropov's diplomatic overtures or seeking any form of political solution in Kabul. His only interest was in pounding the Afghan resistance into submission. Overall, the political strategy in Afghanistan developed haphazardly, through the three General Secretaries, until Gorbachev came to power.

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<sup>185</sup> Reese, 164.

During the first three years of the war (1979–1982), estimates suggest that there were 45,000 Afghan resistance fighters; by the time Gorbachev came to power, 150,000 mujahideen were thought to have taken up arms. At the height of the conflict in 1984, the combined Soviet-Afghan security forces numbered 400,000. Throughout the war, the resistance controlled all the main agricultural areas of the country, while the combined forces controlled the largest cities, the primary roads that linked those cities to Kabul, and the supply route north through the Salang tunnel into the Soviet Union.<sup>186</sup> Despite their large numbers relative to the insurgency, Afghan security forces were poorly trained and incapable of conducting independent operations, and consequently served in a supporting role for every tactical mission.<sup>187</sup>

From these facts, one may conclude that the groundwork for the Afghan invasion and subsequent war was poorly prepared. Because the invasion both shocked the international community and surprised Party officials even within the Kremlin, it was hard to build a diplomatic and political consensus around an agreed strategy. The international community (principally NATO member nations plus Pakistan, Israel and Egypt) believed that the Soviet Union's invasion was the first step in a march to the Persian Gulf and an effort to secure a warm-water port in southwestern Pakistan. Their view was that this was a clear act of aggression with obvious offensive implications. The difference between the Soviets' actual intentions and the international community's interpretation of those intentions created an unbridgeable diplomatic chasm, which grew even wider when the United States decided to take advantage of Moscow's overstretch in Afghanistan.

## **1. U.S. Reaction to the Invasion**

By the time the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the United States had already established significant covert operations in the country, which were calculated to challenge Soviet influence. In April 1979, the CIA began closely tracking Soviet

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<sup>186</sup> Russian General Staff, Lester W. Grau, and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 23–24.

<sup>187</sup> Russian General Staff, 12–13.

activities in Kabul and providing weekly assessments for U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who then passed them on to President Carter. The evidence suggests these assessments convinced Brzezinski that the Soviets planned to invade Afghanistan at some point.<sup>188</sup> Still, Brzezinski's assessment was based upon intelligence reports that had little to do with the Soviet's "defensive" concerns in Afghanistan. Indeed, his assessment had more to do with his fundamental mistrust of the Soviet Union than with an objective appraisal of Soviet intent. In July 1979, President Carter signed a Presidential finding that directed the CIA to support and enhance ongoing resistance to the Communist regime in Afghanistan.<sup>189</sup> Despite this foresight and regular briefs, the actual invasion came as a genuine surprise to both the President and Brzezinski.

President Jimmy Carter's reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan was widely thought at the time to be naïve; many believed he was caught unaware by the aggression. But Carter's administration had begun non-lethal covert assistance to the Afghan rebels under a secret presidential finding that Carter had signed six months before the invasion. The CIA, charged with managing the details of the program, had spent some \$500,000 on propaganda and medicine. All of it was sent into Afghanistan via neighboring Pakistan.<sup>190</sup>

Before the invasion, President Carter did not regard the assistance to Afghanistan as a crucial part of his foreign policy agenda. Immediately following the Soviet invasion, he signed a second presidential finding that completely changed the nature of covert actions in Afghanistan. It directed the CIA to provide the resistance with weapons and other forms of lethal support, and by January 1980, the United States had established what was later considered a model for covert action. Although the investment was still small, relative to what the Reagan Administration subsequently provided, it allowed the resistance to grow. The Pakistanis referred to these initial covert efforts as *Operation*

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<sup>188</sup> Doug MacEachin and Janne Nolan, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: Failure of Intelligence or of the Policy Process?" Working Group Report, No. 3, September 26, 2005, Georgetown University, 8.

<sup>189</sup> Philip B. Heymann, *Living the Policy Process* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



*Cyclone*, which included support from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China, along with their own.<sup>191</sup>

On January 23, 1980, in his State of the Union address, President Carter unveiled his “Carter Doctrine.” He designated Southwest Asia as the “third strategic zone” for the West and declared that it was strategically as important as Europe and East Asia. With not a little hyperbole and with obvious reference to the nineteenth-century Great Game, he referred to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as “the most serious threat to peace since the Second World War” and warned that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the U.S., and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>192</sup> On the diplomatic front, President Carter sent a personal letter to Brezhnev expressing indignation at the invasion and advising that he immediately withdraw Soviet forces.

Brezhnev’s response to Carter suggests that the Soviets were already aware of Operation Cyclone and the support to the Afghan resistance. The following excerpt captures Brezhnev’s own indignation at the strong U.S. opposition to the invasion:

There is no way to agree with your assessment of what is now going on in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan....I would like to underscore that sending limited Soviet contingents to Afghanistan serves only one purpose---the provision of assistance and support in countering acts of external aggression, which have long taken place and now have further expanded....I must underscore also that the changes in Afghan leadership were made by the Afghans themselves, and only by them. Ask the Afghan government about it....I find it necessary to once again reiterate the Afghan government’s request and the granting of this request by the Soviet Union---is exclusively the business of the USSR and Afghanistan, which by themselves and according to mutual agreement regulate their mutual relations and, naturally, cannot allow any external interference in these relations....Regarding your ‘advice’, we already related to you, and here I again repeat, that as soon as the reasons for Afghanistan’s request to

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 55.

the Soviet Union disappear, we intend to fully withdraw Soviet military contingents from the territory of Afghanistan.<sup>193</sup>

As diplomatic tensions rose, significant political concerns began to emerge within the CPSU. The invasion had surprised all but Brezhnev's inner circle and select military leaders. Pakistan quickly saw the invasion as an opportunity to garner military aid from the U.S. and cement its alliance with the West. Pakistan fit neatly into the role of a "front line" state, which helped strengthen its own military regime. Most importantly, the military aid would allow Pakistan to counter-balance India's power in the region and offset India's close relationship with the Soviet Union. Pakistan controlled negotiations with the United States, which gave it a unique opportunity to upgrade their military arsenal as the price for assisting the CIA to arm and supply the Afghan resistance. Pakistan would also find itself at the center of the United Nations' diplomatic overtures throughout the war.<sup>194</sup>

## **2. Soviet Reaction**

Immediately following the invasion, the Troika had to address the concerns of nervous colleagues. Shortly after Andropov went to Kabul to assess the situation in January 1980, there was a brief discussion within the Politburo, during which some members clearly suggested a withdrawal. Ustinov and Gromyko were pessimistic and firmly opposed to such a quick exit, with Gromyko suggesting, "We will never have a complete guarantee, I think, that no hostile country will ever again attack Afghanistan. That is why we need to provide for Afghanistan's complete security."<sup>195</sup> Gromyko's argument amounted to an indefinite commitment to support the Afghan government with Soviet troops, but was at odds with the view of the General Secretary, who believed the occupation should be short.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 29 December, 1979, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 42, file 9. Excerpt from minutes of #177 of Meeting about the response of President Carter's address via direct line of communication regarding the issue of Afghanistan. Approving draft response of Brezhnev: pp. 2-4.

<sup>194</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 10.

<sup>195</sup> Politburo Meeting, February 7, 1980, in *Tragediia i doblest'*, 334. Archival reference APRF Fond 3, op 120, file 44.

<sup>196</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 26-27.

Although senior military commanders and staff carried out their mission, their concerns deepened in the early months of the war.<sup>197</sup> Marshal Ogarkov (Chief of the General Staff), General Varennikov (Deputy Chief of the General Staff), and General Sergei Akhromeev (first Deputy of the Chief of the General Staff) agreed that there was no military solution for the problems in Afghanistan, but such assessments rarely made their way to the Politburo. Intermittently, senior military officers felt optimistic about defeating the resistance, but usually they were pessimistic given the incompetence of Afghanistan's political leadership. Ustinov quickly reminded Ogarkov and Akhromeev, who both strongly felt that Soviet troops should be withdrawn, to stay away from politics.<sup>198</sup>

## **B. BREZHNEV PERIOD (1979–1982)**

When a frail and fading Leonid Brezhnev gave his approval to invade Afghanistan, he was convinced that he could begin withdrawing troops after a regime change and brief period of stabilization. Few Soviet leaders believed direct fighting against the resistance would continue after the initial invasion. They hoped Afghan military forces would do the direct fighting. They were wrong.<sup>199</sup> Brezhnev was less concerned about the internal Afghan resistance than he was with the international reaction. He was deeply concerned that the intervention might lead to a wider conflict, and he was disturbed by the immediate damage to East-West relations. He had strongly endorsed détente with the United States and marginalized Politburo members who opposed his approach. Thus, when Brezhnev directed Soviet forces to move quickly to resolve what had become a lingering regional issue for the USSR, he was surprised by the visceral response of the United States.

At a meeting in May 1980, just before the CPSU plenum went through the pro forma process of ratifying an invasion that had occurred five months before, Brezhnev listened quietly while French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing criticized the Soviet

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<sup>197</sup> As cited in Tanner, page 233: "Overriding the views of several generals, the Soviet political leaders decided to send the Red Army into Afghanistan."

<sup>198</sup> Westad, *Global Cold War*, 320–321.

<sup>199</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 25.

invasion. Although the French President appeared as outraged as President Carter, he chose to engage Brezhnev in person about the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. This diplomatic tactic seemed to work. When the two leaders were alone, Brezhnev attempted to clarify that the Soviets military presence in Afghanistan was a very temporary measure. The General Secretary strongly defended the importance of removing Amin, while adding that he knew Soviet troops could not stay in Afghanistan. With uncharacteristic emotion, Brezhnev emphasized that he understood that a political solution was necessary:

I also wanted to tell you this, one on one. The world is not in universal agreement with our actions. I will make it my personal business to impose a political solution. You can count on me!<sup>200</sup>

Brezhnev never realized the impossibility of imposing a political solution in Afghanistan, and of course did not know how little time he had left as General Secretary.

### **1. Initial Strategic Objectives in Afghanistan**

The initial Soviet strategy was artless. Soon after the invasion it became clear to Soviet generals, through the Afghan Army's unwillingness to take decisive action, that the Soviet military force was not able to fill the role of an occupation force. At that point the gloves came off. The Politburo intended that the Soviet military would directly target, by whatever means necessary, all rural areas and populations that were not supportive of the regime. This politically directed strategy came without implementation guidance and translated into brutality and collateral damage. The intent was for this approach to continue until local socialist movements could govern effectively. However, the challenges in Afghanistan required a more flexible approach than the Soviet Union was capable of engineering. Shortly after Brezhnev's pledge to the French President, any hope of a quick resolution dissipated. Rather than saving a revolutionary government from a dangerous leader and preventing defections to the West, the Soviets found themselves trapped in Afghanistan, propping up their newly installed government to ensure it

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<sup>200</sup> Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, *Le Pouvoir et La Vie* (Le Livre de Poche, 2004), 432–433.

remained in power.<sup>201</sup> This necessitated the first of several strategic changes that occurred through the end of 1985.

The political shifts in strategy were made in a manner similar to the original decision to invade, under a cloak of secrecy. The Soviet public was completely unaware of the scale of the government's commitment to Afghanistan. Coverage of the war was suppressed by the Politburo, and casualty reports were adjusted to reflect substantially lower figures. Accounts of heroism, pictures of the ongoing conflict, and official Soviet diplomatic visits to the war zone were also suppressed. The management of the war in Afghanistan was designed to draw as little attention to it as possible, which was part of the reason why troop levels remained at, or near, the same point throughout the conflict.<sup>202</sup> Any troop increases would have suggested the intensity of the war had exceeded the ability of the limited numbers of troops agreed upon at the June 1980 congressional plenum to control the situation.

## **2. Military Approach and Strategy during Brezhnev Era**

Since the Soviets planned to establish a secure environment for the new Afghan regime by exercising control over critical urban and government infrastructure, their attacks on the rural areas were normally reprisals. Military forces generally succeeded in securing the cities and airports and keeping the highways open for commerce. However, their heavy-handed tactics undermined the new government's efforts to garner support from the population. When Soviet forces conducted air attacks, regardless of the precision and success in targeting insurgents, they nearly always caused high civilian casualties.<sup>203</sup> The Soviets had intended to keep fighting at a very low level, thus minimizing expenditure of resources and casualties. Soviet military leaders soon realized that the intensity of the Afghan resistance made it impossible to achieve either military or political objectives without comprehensive combat operations.

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<sup>201</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 54.

<sup>202</sup> Jonathan Steele, *Soviet Power: The Kremlin's Foreign Policy, Brezhnev to Chernenko* (New York, Touchstone Books, 1984), 127.

<sup>203</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 41; Cordovez and Harrison, 59.

Soviet political leaders took military victory for granted in Afghanistan. They well understood that there would be repressive military action required to bring the country under control, but never envisioned or helped to develop an ideal military strategy. In essence, the Soviet military were viewed as independent actors whose success did not depend on politics and who should be given a task and then allowed simply to accomplish it. The details of execution were of little concern to political leaders, provided they did not damage the international reputation of the Soviet Union any further.

The collateral damage inflicted on Afghan civilians effectively transformed the character of the resistance. The opposition became much more of a national resistance movement than the loose collection of local resistance groups across the nation it had been before.<sup>204</sup> This in turn led to a series of large-scale Soviet military offensives aimed at eradicating the Afghan opposition. In fact, these military offensives had the opposite effect; they increased the ranks of the resistance. Resistance fighters launched attacks from the mountains, and the Soviets invariably responded with combined-arms offensives up the valleys to relieve pressure on the cities and major roads. When the Soviets withdrew from these areas, the Afghan resistance resumed control and their ranks swelled.

Initially, the Soviet military force was labeled the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan. It remained an enduring political imperative not significantly to increase troop strength in Afghanistan. Early in the war, troop levels held steady at 85,000, of which 62,000 were combat forces, with 5,100 tanks and armored personnel carriers.<sup>205</sup> In spite of these troop levels, not one of the 29 provinces in Afghanistan was loyal to the Karmal government or welcomed the Soviet forces. From the start, the Afghan resistance controlled rural Afghanistan, except when Soviet and Afghan Army forces were on the offensive.<sup>206</sup> After an offensive, the combined forces consistently failed to consolidate military gains. These major operations caused a serious backlash and compelled the Soviets to alter their military strategy. They withdrew most of the heavy

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>206</sup> Goodson, 59–60.

armor from the countryside and added infantry forces to help pursue resistance fighters in the mountainous terrain. They sent home useless antiaircraft missile units and brigades of troops that had trouble maneuvering. And they reorganized their ground divisions to increase adaptability and flexibility, so they could respond to the hit-and-run tactics of the resistance. Fresh conscript forces then replaced troops who had struggled through the war's first year.

While trying to limit the use of ground forces, the Soviets increased their air power: the number of helicopters increased from 60 to more than 300 by 1982, and the number of jet fighters doubled to 130. During this same time, the Soviets also dramatically increased the number of bombers committed to the Afghan war and deployed them to Soviet airbases surrounding Afghanistan. Although air operations were not part of the original strategy, Soviet generals determined that it was much easier to attack from the air than to risk their troops on the ground and in the mountains. Until then, the treacherous mountain ranges always benefited the resistance fighters, but the increase in Soviet air power reduced that advantage. The Soviets attacked the rural countryside sporadically and brutally, but never made an effort to hold that ground or engage the rural population.<sup>207</sup> This was not an effort to win the hearts and minds of Afghans; instead it was an effort to render the population helpless. Conventional air operations and punitive air strikes were an extension of the brutal Soviet approach to offensive operations.

The impact of the air operations on the Afghan population was considerable. The Soviet air strikes targeted the livelihoods of farmers and the infrastructure that was a source of community strength. This strategy was the impetus for a mass exodus of civilians to Iran and Pakistan, and it engendered both an enduring hatred for the Soviet Union and a resolve to see the war through to either Soviet defeat or withdrawal.<sup>208</sup>

The tempo of the war increased steadily throughout 1982. Soviet military leaders had access to resources that the Afghan resistance found difficult to match.<sup>209</sup> A new

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<sup>207</sup> Tanner, 248–249.

<sup>208</sup> Reese, 165.

<sup>209</sup> Feifer, 119.

team of Soviet generals arrived to consolidate and reorganize the Afghan Army forces, which had experienced desertion rates of more than 50% in the first two years of the war.<sup>210</sup> Newly introduced Soviet infantry troops became increasingly precise in operations with close air support from jet bombers and strikes from attack helicopters.<sup>211</sup> As the pace increased, the Soviets' biggest problem was their military leaders' reactive approach. Despite the desire for a "lighter" footprint, the military leaders persisted in using their heavy-handed tactics. In response, the resistance fighters redoubled their commitment and the international coalition of support for the insurgency increased its material investment.<sup>212</sup>

In Afghanistan, Soviet senior military officers felt they were being asked to accomplish an impossible task. Yet when their political masters pressed them about whether they could eventually achieve progress, if given time and greater resources, they equivocated and suggested there was potential for progress.<sup>213</sup> But Soviet commanders quickly realized that they could not depend on their Afghan counterparts to maintain internal security or to engage resistance fighters without falling apart.<sup>214</sup> Soviet leaders increasingly realized---too late---that the Afghan government was simply not equipped to stand on its own.<sup>215</sup> In the Kremlin, the political process reflected none of these doubts or concerns, as it began to settle into a familiar bureaucratic form.

### **3. Decision Making Under Brezhnev**

As the occupation dragged on, the Afghanistan Commission within the Politburo became ever more prominent as the primary policymaking body for Afghanistan issues. The secret decision-making process employed for the invasion gradually transitioned into a deliberate policy-development process for managing the war. The Soviet populace still knew very little about the war, and the majority of the Party (including Politburo

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<sup>210</sup> Riaz Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 84.

<sup>211</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 70.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>213</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 38.

<sup>214</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 60.

<sup>215</sup> Halliday, 680.



members without a need-to-know) was not involved in decision making.<sup>216</sup> Among those in the know, one sees the emergence of doubts among Politburo members, including members of the Commission.<sup>217</sup> One member of the commission, Ustinov, had started to listen closely to the doubts of his senior military commanders. For a year, he had received regular field assessments from commanders on the ground. In spite of a steady stream of positive reports from Soviet diplomats on the ground, he was well acquainted with the growing difficulties.<sup>218</sup> Political advisers in Afghanistan had an ingrained tendency to accentuate the positive, and these widely read cables consistently began with extensive reports on improvements in the ground situation. Thus, zealous supporters of the war had evidence of progress to counter the assertions of those who believed troops should be withdrawn.<sup>219</sup>

The only hopes of ending the war quickly were an international diplomatic solution or a political agreement with the leaders of the Afghan resistance. Near the end of Brezhnev's tenure, the Soviets appeared to warm to the idea of United Nations mediation between a Soviet-Afghan contingent and a U.S.-Pakistan contingent. Although the Soviets were outwardly committed to a diplomatic effort, they were probably only using negotiations to buy time for the much awaited development of a military advantage. Any agreement acceptable to the Soviet Union would have to involve the U.S. cutting off outside support to the Afghan resistance. Soviet concessions for the sake of a diplomatic resolution were simply not feasible for the Politburo, given how the General Secretary and other Politburo members had begun to see the success of the Afghan mission as closely linked to their international reputation.

Although the Politburo had not openly addressed Ustinov's doubts, some members of the Afghanistan Commission saw value in exploring diplomatic solutions. In late 1981, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs received authority to prepare a memorandum recommending the acceptance of talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The objective was to get Pakistan to abandon its growing support for the resistance. The Politburo

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<sup>216</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 57.

<sup>217</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 65, and Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 58.

<sup>218</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 65.

<sup>219</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 56.

approved the proposal, but the influence of the United States on Pakistan and Zia's own natural antipathy for the Soviet Union made it impossible to reach an agreement.<sup>220</sup>

In April 1982, Diego Cordovez, the newly-appointed special representative to the U.N. Secretary General, oversaw the first round of indirect negotiations. In Politburo discussions Andropov had strongly advocated cooperation with U.N. mediation. His visits to Afghanistan in late 1981 and early 1982 seem to have left him with disdain for the Afghan leadership, because they focused so intently on petty factional quarrels, while ceding the most difficult work to Soviet troops and advisers. Karmal remained unmoved by Andropov's suggestions to consider broadening the Afghan government to include non-Communists.<sup>221</sup> This effort proved to be fruitless.

#### **4. The End of an Era**

Brezhnev died on 10 November 1982. After Brezhnev's seventeen years in power, the Party leadership was rudderless, and pessimism pervaded the political class. The fight to succeed Brezhnev occurred against a backdrop of growing concerns over the state's other problems. During his last five years in power, the economy slid toward stagnation, which precipitated an acrimonious debate over resource allocation, continued military innovation and the need for economic reform.<sup>222</sup>

In advance of the Party Congress in 1981, Brezhnev had discussed with Marshal Ogarkov the idea of withdrawing Soviet forces from Afghanistan, but there was no political will to end the war at that early juncture. Indeed, the political focus was still on succeeding in Afghanistan.<sup>223</sup> Brezhnev died after six months of significantly reduced Soviet attacks on civilian opposition and Afghan resistance targets.<sup>224</sup> The international community initially believed the pause to be some kind of a signal that the Soviets were

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<sup>220</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 77 and Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 58–59.

<sup>221</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 94.

<sup>222</sup> Colton, "Perspectives on Civil Military Relations in the Soviet Union," 4.

<sup>223</sup> Galeotti, 16.

<sup>224</sup> Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan in 1982: Still no Solution," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 23, No. 2, A Survey of Asia in 1982: Part II (Feb., 1983), University of California Press, 133. The international leaders who attended Brezhnev's funeral included George Bush, Vice President of the U.S.; Karl Cartens, President of West Germany; President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan; Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India; and Babrak Karmal.

ready to enter into preliminary discussions with the UN and seriously consider withdrawal. Instead, the lull simply reflected the strategic paralysis of a Soviet government whose leader was dying. This transition period was defined by a military stalemate in Afghanistan.<sup>225</sup>

### C. THE YEARS OF SUCCESSION

It was clear that either Yuri Andropov or Konstantin Chernenko would succeed Brezhnev as General Secretary. Andropov had the edge largely because of his close personal relationship with Brezhnev and his knowledge about other key Politburo members who participated in the selection process. The Soviet military establishment favored the most capable leader and believed that Chernenko was not strong enough to do the job well. Although the military establishment did not play a direct role in succession politics, their support strengthened any candidate, and the ongoing war in Afghanistan increased the importance of their preferred candidate.<sup>226</sup> Chernenko had no real relationship with the military. The military establishment was sanguine about Andropov because of their positive history with him.<sup>227</sup> While Andropov was head of the KGB, the relationship between the KGB and the military had changed from hostility before his arrival into a partnership. The KGB began sharing intelligence assessments, logistical support, and free access to special assault units with the military during Andropov's tenure.<sup>228</sup> The military establishment made clear their preference for Andropov through Ustinov.

During this period of turnover, a very small group of Soviet generals controlled the combined Soviet-Afghan military forces. This same group also directed military strategy in Afghanistan with very limited interference from or involvement by the Kremlin. The generals were now convinced that the war in Afghanistan would be a protracted one, and they were oblivious to the politicians' urgency to end it quickly. In

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>226</sup> Bruce Parrott, "Political Change and Civil-Military Relations." In *Soldiers and the Soviet State: Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, edited by Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 70.

<sup>227</sup> Medvedev, 99.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 106.

preparation for a long war, they embarked on a massive effort to improve the supporting infrastructure of Afghanistan; they widened strategic roads, established oil pipelines from the north to key transportation hubs, and built airfields in important areas.<sup>229</sup>

At this stage, the military was making the best of a bad situation in Afghanistan. Senior military leaders saw the war as an exceptional training ground for future generals; tours of duty brought experience, respect, and quicker promotions. The main problem the military faced was the woeful performance of Soviet equipment, primarily due to the refusal of senior Party leaders to invest in modernization efforts.<sup>230</sup> This created palpable tension between military leaders and Party officials.<sup>231</sup> The military hoped that Yuri Andropov's emergence as General Secretary would generate positive change in this arena. They were destined to be disappointed.

#### **D. THE ANDROPOV PERIOD (1982–1984)**

Initially, Brezhnev's death resulted in very few changes to defense policies and priorities, despite the military establishment's belief that their already large share of the national budget would increase. One of Andropov's first actions as General Secretary was to receive Pakistan President Zia ul Haq, who later recalled that the meeting was cordial. Zia said Andropov gave the impression that starting the war was an agonizing decision that he personally opposed, and indicated a strong interest in finding a solution.<sup>232</sup> Andropov suggested that he preferred a diplomatic settlement and flatly rejected any intention to annex Afghanistan. The two leaders closed the meeting by expressing their commitment to a closer relationship.<sup>233</sup> Despite outward appearances of potential cooperation, Zia nonetheless had already committed Pakistan to serving as the primary staging base to support the Afghan war. As Andropov was the chief architect of the invasion, all of his diplomatic overtures with Zia were pure political theater. Yet, Andropov appeared to be having doubts about the Afghan intervention and wanted to

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<sup>229</sup> O'Ballance, 122.

<sup>230</sup> Medvedev, 101.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 104–105.

<sup>232</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 94.

<sup>233</sup> Khan, 106.

sustain the U.N. process, perhaps in case the Soviet military was unable to stabilize Afghanistan.

## **1. Strategic Objectives**

Andropov continued the steady shift in national priorities begun under Brezhnev by stressing the importance of domestic economic growth in the Soviet Union.<sup>234</sup> Like his predecessor, Andropov was unmoved by the military's attempts to increase defense expenditures and focus on military modernization. He maintained Brezhnev's policy of investing in consumer goods more than in additional military spending. Andropov clashed with the Chief of the General Staff and reasserted civilian primacy over the military establishment. In the spring of 1983, he reminded the outspoken Ogarkov that he was not indispensable and promoted General Sergei Akhromeev to the rank of Marshal, awarding him full membership in the Party's Central Committee. Since Akhromeev was Ogarkov's Deputy, those honors clearly indicated that Ogarkov's tenure as Chief of the General Staff was coming to an end.<sup>235</sup>

As this civil-military sideshow developed, the situation in Afghanistan did not improve. In the first three years of the war, the military saw the fight in Afghanistan more as an irritating distraction than the start of further expansion southward. There were no efforts to increase the number of Soviet combat troops, despite their inability to defeat the Afghan resistance. Of course, the political determination not to increase troop levels was significant. The Politburo thought a massive escalation of troops would complicate matters on the ground and send the wrong message internationally. Their policy towards troop strength remained unchanged, and they never refurbished airbases necessary to support strategic aircraft for extended operations. The only improvements involved better support helicopters and fighter aircraft.<sup>236</sup> The failure of senior military leaders to agitate for more troops and resources for Afghanistan indicated a "passive aggressive" attitude toward the war. In essence, they would wage the war as directed but strongly preferred to

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<sup>234</sup> Oberdorfer, 64.

<sup>235</sup> Parrott, 72.

<sup>236</sup> Steele, 126.

ready themselves for what they viewed as their most significant strategic challenge---the United States.

Since Afghanistan was not a high priority for Andropov, he tentatively started the process of negotiating a withdrawal. He indicated that Soviet international influence was best served by example, rather than the force of arms. He wanted to demonstrate through action that two of his primary policy objectives were improving relations with Europe and China and investing internally in domestic economic initiatives. Although the Soviets appeared to make genuine efforts to accelerate UN negotiations over Afghanistan, poor health forced Andropov to focus on ensuring the succession of his own team of advisers rather than expending political capital on such a controversial issue as Afghanistan. Consequently, strategic changes were minor and diplomatic negotiations never got off the ground.<sup>237</sup> Although it might have been true that he wanted a diplomatic settlement, Andropov nonetheless was not interested in pursuing it at a major cost of any kind.

Andropov revealed his sentiments about Afghanistan at a Politburo meeting on March 10, 1983, when he and Gromyko considered the strategic options available to them. Andropov suggested that he was using the United Nations to encourage Pakistan and the United States to stop supporting the resistance. Gromyko described the situation cautiously (“things are going slowly”) and stressed the importance of achieving a “political settlement.”<sup>238</sup> He implied that Afghanistan would not improve in the near future and so finding a way out should be a priority. With Babrak Karmal at the helm, the likelihood of achieving a political settlement between the warring factions was very low. He was at least as weak as Taraki, and much less effective as an administrator than Amin. Outwardly, Andropov seemed ready to follow up his conciliatory comments to Zia and his stated desire to end the war. In fact, he was not seriously considering putting forth

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<sup>237</sup> Galeotti, 16–17.

<sup>238</sup> “About the situation in Afghanistan and additional measures for its improvement,” Top Secret Memorandum to the TSK KPSS from top party and government officials (presided Andropov U.V, attended by G.A. Aliev, M.S. Gorbachev, A.A. Gromyko, A. Ya. Pel’she, N.A. Tikhonov, K.U. Chernenko, P.N. Demichev, V.I. Dolgih, V.V. Kuznetsov, M.S. Solomentsev, I.V. Kapitonov, and N.I. Kapitonov) March 10, 1983. Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOE translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, Reel 3, Op. 42, File 51.

much effort on this score. Andropov rejected Gromyko's suggestion that the Soviet Union consider moving quickly toward a negotiated settlement:

**ANDROPOV:** You remember, with what difficulty and caution we were solving the question of sending troops into Afghanistan? L.I. Brezhnev insisted on a name-by-name vote by the Politburo members. The question was considered at the CK Plenum. In solving the Afghan problem we must proceed from the existing realities. What do you want? This is a feudal country, where tribes have always run their own territory, and the central power by far rarely reached every village. The issue is not Pakistan's position. Here we are being fought by the American imperialism, which well understands, that at this stretch of international politics has lost its positions. Thus we cannot retreat. There are no miracles in the world. Sometimes we get angry with the Afghans, that they behave inconsistently, unfold their work slowly. But let us remember our fight with the Basmachi. Then nearly the entire Red Army was concentrated in the Central Asia, the struggle against Basmachi continued into the middle of the 1930s. Thus relations with Afghanistan require being demanding and understanding.<sup>239</sup>

As a result of Andropov's feigned interest in a diplomatic settlement, Diego Cordovez became the UN's lead negotiator in the drama surrounding the war. At the April 1983 negotiations in Geneva, Cordovez pressed for a comprehensive draft settlement, but discovered several irreconcilable issues, one of which involved the Soviets' desire to get a noninterference agreement with Pakistan. Despite unresolved issues, talks ended on a high note with expectations of further discussions in late June.<sup>240</sup> It now seems likely that Andropov was using Cordovez and the United Nations to generate a strategic advantage, since he told the Politburo that the Soviet Union could ill afford to walk away and that, like the Basmachi struggle (1917–1926), the struggle for Afghanistan might last a long time.

## **2. Military Approach and Strategy**

Not long after Andropov became General Secretary, he involved himself in military operations. In an unprecedented move, he personally approved a cease-fire agreement with a renowned northern warlord Massoud, in order to protect the northern

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Khan, 92–93.

pipelines from sabotage and to insure the safe passage of Soviet supplies into the country. Soviet military priorities were to exercise control over the major cities and roads---something they were able to do in this period better than before or afterwards---and to help Karmal broaden support for his government, something that they increasingly saw as unlikely.<sup>241</sup>

In 1983, the Soviet military leadership in Kabul decided their goal was no longer to seize and hold ground, but rather to target the spirit of the resistance by inflicting as much damage as possible. This involved either bombing a village or conducting a fierce attack-helicopter assault on a small community, or a combination of both, to depopulate areas suspected of shielding resistance fighters.<sup>242</sup> Like a similar decision during Brezhnev's tenure, this strategy was counterproductive: it served to inflame passions of an otherwise fractured resistance.<sup>243</sup>

At the end of Andropov's tenure, the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan had increased to its peak strength of 108,000. The forces were evolving to meet the demands of the theatre and searching for a better approach to counterinsurgency and mountain warfare. Soviet military leaders continued to substitute more agile forces for bulky formations with heavy weapons. However, the troop-rotation policy prevented Soviet ground forces from developing any significant body of institutional knowledge. A six-month deployment policy meant that seven Soviet district commanders were unable to gain the most from troops around the country.<sup>244</sup> Amid talk of a diplomatic settlement, the military remained focused on working themselves into a position of strength for leverage in the eventual negotiations.

Soviet advisers controlled the Afghan ministries, all of which were filled with insurgent sympathizers, which meant that very little took place without the resistance knowing about it first. To add to the mounting difficulties, drug use among Soviet troops

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<sup>241</sup> Tanner, 253.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>243</sup> O'Ballance, 120–121.

<sup>244</sup> Khan, 85.



increased substantially during this period.<sup>245</sup> None of this bode well for the long-term success of the Soviet mission, but the short-term impact of scorched earth tactics was still taking a toll on the resistance. There seemed to be an operational advantage developing, but the opportunity to capitalize on it was not seized.

In March 1983, Andropov told U.N. Secretary General Perez de Cuellar that the Soviets did not wish to remain in Afghanistan, but that they would not withdraw if it left the Afghan regime at risk.<sup>246</sup> In front of the Secretary General and Cordovez, Andropov enumerated the problems with the war: loss of life, unnecessary financial expenditure, regional tensions, setback to détente, and loss of Soviet prestige in the Third World. He stressed that the withdrawal of Soviet forces was contingent upon putting a stop to “the rebel threat,” by which he meant both the Afghan resistance and the funding from the West to sustain it.<sup>247</sup>

The optimism many leaders in the United Nations felt when Andropov took power was extinguished in the summer of 1983. He was ailing physically and, contrary to expectations, was simply incapable of changing the direction of Soviet strategy in Afghanistan. The international situation worsened dramatically when, on September 1<sup>st</sup>, the Soviet Air Force shot down a Korean airliner, claiming to have mistaken it for an American reconnaissance aircraft. This resulted in a strong condemnation from the United States and an inept Soviet response. Arms-control talks with the United States broke down, and fear of a possible U.S. first-strike missile attack gripped the Soviet Politburo.<sup>248</sup> As mistrust grew on both sides, the United States increased their commitment to pin down Soviet troops in Afghanistan for as long as possible.<sup>249</sup>

Amid this recharged Cold War environment, the struggle for succession began again in Moscow. As Andropov’s health deteriorated, political maneuvering consumed the military establishment. Ogarkov, the Chief of General Staff, aligned himself with

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<sup>245</sup> Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan in 1983: And Still no Solution,” *Asian Survey*, Vol 24, A Survey of Asia in 1983: Part II (Feb., 1984), University of California Press, 234.

<sup>246</sup> Halliday, 681.

<sup>247</sup> Khan, 107.

<sup>248</sup> Halliday, 682.

<sup>249</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 91.

Chernenko, and Akhromeyev, his deputy, aligned himself with Andropov's protégé Mikhail Gorbachev.<sup>250</sup> In the end, Andropov's poor health prevented him from ever establishing a dominant position over the military within the Politburo. He flatly stated that Soviet military strength was sufficient to counter any threat from the West, which was unacceptable and even outrageous from the military point of view.<sup>251</sup> The bureaucratic battle lines had been drawn.

### **3. Succession Dynamics**

The flattening military budget under both Brezhnev and Andropov showed that the war in Afghanistan was not a high priority for Soviet political leaders. The state was at risk because of a stagnant Soviet economy, not because of the Afghan resistance. Soviet political leaders understood the need to control the military, while the military establishment continued to press for spending increases based not on needs in Afghanistan, but on the need to counter the perceived threat of the United States. The military had been preparing for war with America for so long, that it simply could not focus on challenges closer to home. As Andropov grew sicker and less assertive, Ogarkov openly criticized the Party leadership again for not expanding the military budget during a time of war. By 1984, the tension between the military establishment and the Party was even greater than before Andropov had taken office.<sup>252</sup>

Despite his short time in office, Andropov nurtured a new generation of leaders in the Politburo, who guided the Soviet Union through the last eight years of its existence. Among the new personalities was Mikhail Gorbachev. He served as Andropov's link to the Party and the Politburo throughout the General Secretary's entire illness. Andropov clearly wanted Gorbachev to succeed him and prepared him for leadership by giving him responsibilities beyond his designated role of engineering agricultural growth. Gorbachev supervised the Party re-election campaign and led several important diplomatic engagements, all of which were designed to groom him for assumption of power in the Kremlin. But Gorbachev had to wait his turn.

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<sup>250</sup> Parker, 251.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>252</sup> Parrott, 72.

## **E. CHERNENKO PERIOD (1984–85)**

Konstantin Chernenko's long tenure and close relationship with Brezhnev led to his appointment as the new General Secretary less than a day after Andropov's death on February 9, 1984. The military establishment, led by Ogarkov, supported Chernenko's selection because they thought he would reverse the stagnating military budget trends. They were incorrect. Chernenko believed that the Soviet Union would achieve national security with patience and diplomatic negotiations, rather than with a further military build-up.<sup>253</sup> The civil-military schism grew wider when Ogarkov realized that the disappointing trend would continue.

Chernenko made no diplomatic progress in Afghanistan, and like his predecessors he intensified military attacks throughout the country. The new General Secretary intended to solidify his legacy by destroying the Afghan resistance and winning the war once and for all. But a major constraint on Soviet strategy in Afghanistan continued to be maintaining existing troop levels. There was a sense that referring to the occupation force as "The Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces" somehow eased the fears of the international community, clarified its temporary nature, and symbolized the limited commitment the Soviet Union had to the war itself. Neither the Politburo nor military establishment ever intended to win at all costs, because that would have entailed increasing troop levels to meet the increasing size of the Afghan resistance, believed to be well over 100,000 when Chernenko took office.<sup>254</sup>

Instead, Chernenko vastly increased the supply of munitions to support the military force on the ground. Military leaders welcomed this increase, which reflected Chernenko's personal belief that more munitions meant a better military strategy in the Afghan environment.<sup>255</sup> The resistance could effectively counter Soviet troops in the mountains, but could not effectively counter the technology associated with massive artillery strikes, intense carpet bombing, and overwhelming attack helicopter raids. The

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Halliday, 682.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

insurgency did not break during this period. Rather, the factions of the resistance finally unified against their common enemy.

Chernenko was a long-standing rival of Andropov. He had watched the star of the former KGB chief rise and eclipse his own in the mid-1970s. The two did not agree on much, and at Politburo meetings Chernenko often remained quiet or repeated commonly held Party views, while Andropov exhibited his intellectual prowess. Many saw the selection of Chernenko as a return to the Brezhnev era, since he had served at the longtime General Secretary's side from the start of his political career.<sup>256</sup> The new General Secretary was plagued by ill health during his short 13-month tenure, and his unsteady direction of policy created uncertainty throughout the Kremlin. It was soon clear that he was not a statesman who could guide the Soviet Union through international tensions and domestic challenges. Chernenko told the Politburo that to repair the strained relationship with the U.S., they needed direct diplomacy rather than a further military build-up. By leaving the demands of the military establishment unanswered, he set the stage for further bureaucratic conflict.<sup>257</sup>

### **1. The Strategic Objective**

During Chernenko's oversight of the war, the Afghan communists grew increasingly dependent on the Soviets, politically as well as militarily. Soviet political advisers steadily increased their control over the Afghan government. Although troop strength remained constant, by the end of 1984 the number of Soviet political advisers had more than doubled to over 10,000. Yet, efforts to build capacity were not effective, partly because the Afghans in charge of ministries were simply figureheads, unable to carry out even simple tasks without prior Soviet approval and close supervision. Even the Afghan President depended completely on his Soviet advisers for the most routine business. The Soviets provided sizeable aid packages to Afghanistan (\$350 million in 1984) and dramatically increased arms to support the Afghan Army (\$683 million); these increases were part of Chernenko's efforts to put an end to Afghan resistance. Other

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<sup>256</sup> Oberdorfer, 80.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 70.

aggressive ideological efforts developed to cement Afghanistan's long-term relationship with the Soviet Union. Among these initiatives was a program that relocated more than 10,000 Afghan children to Soviet soil in order to give them up to ten years of programmed communist education.<sup>258</sup>

Chernenko's strategy in Afghanistan was to apply so much pressure, and inflict so much destruction that the morale of the resistance would be shattered and its will to fight on would dissipate. He was driven by a personal desire both to end the mission on Soviet terms and to succeed politically before emphysema killed him. As it happened, the mass emigration from the targeted rural Afghan areas created more stress for the resistance than did the Soviet attacks. By mid-1984, Afghanistan had a population of just over 14 million, of whom an estimated 3,500,000 were refugees in Pakistan and 1,500,000 in Iran.<sup>259</sup> The numerous Soviet offensives increased the exposure and vulnerability of Soviet troops as well, even though it did not lead to sustainable military success.<sup>260</sup>

At no time did Chernenko seriously consider a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Despite troubling reports from senior military leaders, the new General Secretary did not believe that the Soviet Union was mired in an unwinnable war. Political officers on the ground in Afghanistan reported steady progress, and Chernenko chose to focus on these more sanguine impressions. His leadership style was a throwback to the Stalinist era, where truth was manufactured and assessments of the war were made in a vacuum with Kremlin sources, rather than from dependable military sources on the ground. Chernenko publicly adopted the well-worn Soviet position that if it were possible

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<sup>258</sup> Goodson, 63.

<sup>259</sup> Demographic data of Afghanistan can be found in <http://www.populstat.info/Asia/afghanic.htm>, accessed August 24, 2011. Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan in 1982," 138, wrote: "The Afghan population in 1978 numbered about 15.5 million. Refugees (total 3.5 million) and the dead (about 500,000) now total four million or so, almost one quarter of the 1978 population. If enough Afghans leave for potentially volatile Pakistan and Iran, the Soviets gain a strategic plus. Then, settlers from the European Soviet Socialist Republics (not from Soviet Central Asia, which would invite trouble) can be transplanted to Afghanistan. In effect, Afghanistan would become the 16th SSR. Unconfirmed reports in Pakistani media indicate that about 30,000 Russian families recently arrived in northern Afghanistan. The process may have already begun."

<sup>260</sup> Galeotti, 17–18.

to stop international interference, then Soviet troops would be withdrawn.<sup>261</sup> Neither the U.S. nor Pakistan had any intention of slowing their support efforts.

By 1984, the Afghan resistance had matured and expanded throughout the country. The brutal Soviet strategy shifted popular Afghan support almost exclusively to the resistance; the only supporters of the Karmal government appeared to be those on the Soviet payroll. Despite widespread support, the resistance was plagued by poor equipment and undependable supply lines from Pakistan. After five years of fighting and considerable losses, the resistance had barely managed to survive militarily. The tenuous optimism this gave to supporters of the Afghan mission was short lived. The tide of the war began to turn as the U.S. political commitment deepened. After five years of war, the United States was fully implementing Reagan's unwritten doctrine of "rolling back" all Soviet advances, and Afghanistan came to be the centerpiece of that strategy. Beginning in 1984, the resistance began receiving exponentially greater assistance from the United States. In that first year of "roll back," direct support to the Afghan resistance mounted to \$100 million. The next year, the Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI) distributed \$280 million of U.S. aid to staging areas in Pakistan.<sup>262</sup> The United States decided to increase the pressure again in the spring of 1985, when President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive (NSSD) 166, which sought to drive the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan by "all means available."<sup>263</sup> The steadily increasing support to the Afghan resistance stood in stark contrast to the Politburo's continued unwillingness to consider increasing Soviet troop levels.

## **2. Military Approach and Strategy**

The primary military approach during Chernenko's rule involved sustained offensive operations, notably using scorched-earth tactics to punish all Afghans who supported the resistance. Soviet forces gradually worked their strikes and offensives from one city to the next, in every corner of the country, in a sustained effort to deny the Afghan resistance access to support. The military and political trends in Afghanistan also

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<sup>261</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 175.

<sup>262</sup> Khan, 88.

<sup>263</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 160.

suggested that the Soviet Union had no intention of ever leaving. Soviet political advisers effectively led every Afghan ministry, and the Soviet military had reorganized itself in order to address Afghanistan's unique challenges more effectively.<sup>264</sup>

The Afghan Army finally began to grow again and reached 40,000 by the middle of 1984, thanks to aggressive conscription.<sup>265</sup> Meanwhile, the Soviets undertook the largest offensive operations of the war: six offensives, each of which involved up to 10,000 troops. Soviet casualties peaked at 2,343 soldiers killed in action in 1984, the highest number of Soviet losses of any year of the war.<sup>266</sup> Soviet forces' relentless and indiscriminant destruction of Afghan crops and livestock put incredible pressure and strain on the resistance. In early 1985, insurgent leaders feared that their movement might collapse.<sup>267</sup>

Yet for all of the Soviets' military progress, sizeable strategic problems prevented them from consolidating these gains. The morale of Soviet troops was low. For the most part, the Army consisted of inexperienced draftees, unprepared for the rigors of constant and violent combat with a determined foe. And although the flow of munitions and large-scale logistical support from Moscow increased under Chernenko's rule, the military managed the distribution of critical supplies poorly within Afghanistan. Young Soviet troops, who risked their lives daily, were disillusioned by the lack of efficient support from the Soviet military headquarters in Kabul. At the close of 1984, estimates of the total Soviet casualties in the war amounted to at least 15,000 dead, wounded, and sick.<sup>268</sup> The Soviet Army had now fought longer in Afghanistan than they had in World War II. It was clear that although the Soviets could destroy the resistance in large numbers, they could not conquer it.<sup>269</sup>

Back in Moscow, the stagnating defense budget put a strain on civil-military relations and exacerbated the Soviets' challenges in Afghanistan. Problems that had simmered under Andropov exploded when the new General Secretary announced that he,

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264 Goodson, 63–64.

265 Tanner, 254.

266 Ibid., 147.

267 Rubin, 181.

268 Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan in 1982," 137.

269 Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan in 1983," 239.

too, would not invest new funds in military modernization. Ogarkov's habitual insubordination reached a new level of vitriol, as he compared the threat from the United States to the imminent threat from Germany on the eve of World War II. With regard to strengthening Soviet defenses, he noted that Chernenko had said, "This demand must be fulfilled undeviatingly," but pointed out that there was no indication that the Soviet leader intended to do what he had said. Ogarkov further claimed that if Chernenko did not respond promptly to the threat from the West, his current policies would endanger the state's security. Although the General Secretary was not in power long enough to alter the trajectory of most well-established Soviet policies, he did find the time to address the insubordination of his Chief of General Staff.<sup>270</sup>

### **3. Ogarkov's Dismissal**

The tension between modernizing the military and executing the war in Afghanistan revealed important insights about attitudes among military leaders. These skilled Cold Warriors had focused their entire professional lives on conflict with the United States. They did not regard the Afghan War as validation of their importance, but rather as an obstacle to executing the programs they wanted. Marshal Ogarkov led the return of the military establishment's focus on what they felt was truly important. Despite repeated warnings to lower his profile, Ogarkov defiantly continued to attack Party leaders as though it was his responsibility to protect the empire from certain danger. Ogarkov's outbursts under Brezhnev and Andropov troubled the Minister of Defense. As Ustinov's health declined, speculation developed that Akhromeev would soon be promoted to Chief of the General Staff and that Ogarkov would replace the fading Defense Minister. Ustinov personally took extraordinary and swift measures to prevent this from happening.

Gorbachev, Ustinov and Chernenko, who all feared that Ogarkov would muscle his way into the Minister of Defense's office,<sup>271</sup> formed an alliance to remove him.<sup>272</sup> They created the political momentum necessary to prevent the military establishment

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<sup>270</sup> Parrott, 73.

<sup>271</sup> Herspring, 222.

<sup>272</sup> Parker, 398.



from asserting itself within the Politburo, as it had done during Zhukov's tenure. In September 1984, Ogarkov was transferred from his position as Chief of the General Staff to the Commander of the Western Theatre of Operations. This put him squarely in charge of the vulnerable flank facing NATO forces, whose dangers he had harped on for many years. As intended, Ogarkov was no longer considered as a successor to Ustinov. In some ways, Ogarkov's removal was inevitable<sup>273</sup> and symbolized the diminishing military influence in the Soviet system.<sup>274</sup>

When Ustinov died in December of 1984, a benign political choice, Marshal Sergei Sokolov, succeeded him as Minister of Defense. Sokolov had been the commander of all Soviet ground forces during the invasion of Afghanistan, for which he received the coveted "Hero of the Soviet Union" award. The appointment was widely accepted as an effort to appease the military establishment prior to another succession crisis. At the same time, Party officials were relieved that someone less combative than Ogarkov was stepping into the role. When Chernenko died, the military no longer had any direct representation inside the Politburo (Sokolov was not a voting member), and they found themselves unable to influence the succession process.<sup>275</sup> The impact of this development on Afghan policy would not be felt for another two years when Gorbachev began plotting his course to withdraw Soviet forces.

Very shortly after Chernenko's death on March 10, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was named the new General Secretary. He was the fourth Soviet leader in less than four years. Unlike his enfeebled predecessors, Gorbachev projected vitality, vision and hope for a quick political resolution to the Afghan conflict.<sup>276</sup> Gorbachev's rise to power, foreseen by his mentor Yuri Andropov, had been delayed, but not derailed, by Chernenko's reign. When Gorbachev took office, the civil-military relationship had been badly damaged by budgetary friction and political marginalization of military leaders. He found himself in a stand-off with the military, although he was not yet politically powerful enough to confront them. Initially, he intended only to implement Andropov's vision of revitalizing

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<sup>273</sup> Nichols, 122–23.

<sup>274</sup> Parrott, 90.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 74–75.

<sup>276</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 181.

the economy and establishing a stronger Party. What Gorbachev did not foresee was the far-reaching and negative impact his shift in priorities would ultimately have on civil-military relations.<sup>277</sup>

The strategic evolution of the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan reflected deep disconnects between the Soviet military leaders on the ground and the political leaders in Moscow. The Soviets continued to employ a repressive approach, or “rubblization strategy” from 1982 through 1985.<sup>278</sup> In 1985, thanks to increased international coalition support for the insurgency, momentum began to shift from the Soviets back to the Afghan resistance, and Soviet helicopters and aircraft became increasingly vulnerable.<sup>279</sup>

The nature of the Soviet system was that the military was given a task and expected to complete it. There was little thought on the part of the Politburo about the difficulties. Indeed, the Politburo had little interest in the military strategy that was employed so long as it led to success. When the military strategy did not result in immediate success they remained uninterested and simply pressed their Generals to continue the effort. The Soviet generals were reticent when questioned by the Politburo about whether or not progress could be achieved, only suggesting that additional time and effort might make it possible. Although the military was arguably giving their political masters the answers they wanted to hear, a closer civil-military relationship might have made clear to them the true scope of the problem.<sup>280</sup>

The Politburo saw the war more as an irritating distraction than a political imperative through the first five years. Delegating the conduct of the war to a very small group of Soviet generals with very little oversight or involvement made achieving progress more problematic, since the major challenges in Afghanistan were less military than political. Although there was no political solution to the war readily available, the

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<sup>277</sup> Nichols, 128–29.

<sup>278</sup> This moniker for the Soviet strategy was coined by perhaps the most assiduous eyewitness reporter during the Soviet War in Afghanistan, in a 1984 news article: Edward Girardet, “Moscow’s War of Terror in Afghanistan,” *U.S. News and World Report* 15 October 1984, 43–44.

<sup>279</sup> Feifer (2009) and Victoria Schofield, *Afghan Frontier: Feuding and Fighting in Central Asia* (New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2003) provide anecdotal information which addresses the nature of the Afghan insurgency during these first five years and, in particular, the brutality of both the Soviets and their insurgent adversaries.

<sup>280</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 38.

lack of political oversight nonetheless prevented a quicker exit from the country. The Soviet generals directed military strategy in Afghanistan and well understood that the Afghan war would take many years to resolve favorably, if at all.

Although Brezhnev had been surprised by the international outcry against the Afghan invasion, the reputational risks were different from his perspective than they were for his successors. The March 1979 Politburo deliberations over Afghanistan had shown that Brezhnev understood the risks he faced. Andrei Gromyko, for one, had spelled them out clearly:

**GROMYKO:** Everything we have done in the past few years with such hard work in terms of unwinding the international tension, arms limitations and much more---all this will be set back. Certainly, for China all this will make a good present. All non-aligned countries will be against us. In a word, serious consequences are expected from such an action, what will we win?<sup>281</sup>

Brezhnev hoped to mitigate each of the three risks by ending the occupation as quickly as possible and meanwhile providing assurances to non-aligned countries that the job would be a short one. His failing health prevented him from achieving those aspirations.

Although Brezhnev commanded respect for much of his long tenure, his top generals understood that he had in effect stopped working after a massive heart attack in 1976. General Akhromeev, who had frequently attended Politburo meetings during Brezhnev's last two years, noted: "It was a bitter and insulting experience to watch as the Politburo members, for the most part senile people who had lost their capacity to work, devoted an hour and a half not to adopting but rather to rubber-stamping solutions to some of the most important issues in the lives of the people, completely without substantive analysis or consideration."<sup>282</sup> When Brezhnev realized his mistake in approving the invasion of Afghanistan, he no longer had the physical or political power left to reverse the damage. His frailty rendered him incapable of enforcing his will on the situation. It may well be that had Brezhnev lived and possessed the strength to act with

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<sup>281</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 17–19 March 1979, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC (*About the Escalation of the Situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Our Possible Measures*), Document 1/1, translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 25, pages 12–17.

<sup>282</sup> John G. Hines, Ellis M. Mishulovich, and John F. Shull, "Soviet Intentions 1965–1985: An Analytical Comparison of U.S-Soviet Assessments During the Cold War," Office of Net Assessment of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Vol. 1, 52.

resolute purpose, Soviet troops would have been withdrawn much sooner than they were. In the months leading up to Brezhnev's death, the international community held out hope that the apparent slowdown in Afghan fighting was a signal that the Soviets were ready to negotiate a peace in Afghanistan and consider a withdrawal. In reality, the confusion of succession, which affected the military arm as potently as the political arm, was responsible for the lull. This created the condition of a temporary military stalemate on the ground in Afghanistan and strategic paralysis until Andropov could provide meaningful political direction.<sup>283</sup> There was no lull in the expanding efforts of the West to provide support to the Afghan resistance. The U.S. strategy to keep Soviets mired in an unwinnable war was well under way.

The emergence of Andropov as General Secretary did not substantially improve the situation, as his poor health precluded him from establishing a dominant position over the military. During his short tenure he had dashed the hopes of the military establishment (and Marshall Ogarkov specifically) by stating unequivocally that existing Soviet military strength was sufficient to counter any threat from the West. That assessment was at odds with the military point of view. Indeed, Andropov entered office with priorities that diverged substantially from those of the military.

Although Andropov was in effect the architect of the invasion, his visits to Afghanistan in 1980 and 1981 had given him the impression that the Afghan government was too weak and ineffectual to succeed in governing without Soviet assistance. There is little doubt that he wanted out of Afghanistan. However, what slowed the exiting process in his mind was the support the West was providing to the Afghan resistance. This was the key complicating factor for Andropov. Indeed, he strongly felt that there could be "No Retreat" in the face of imperialist interference. In front of the UN Secretary General, Andropov rattled off his negative assessment of being involved in Afghanistan: loss of life, unnecessary financial expenditure, regional tensions, setback to détente, and loss of Soviet prestige in the Third World. And yet, he refused to consider a troop withdrawal before what he termed as a rebel threat went away. Nevertheless, he soon realized that despite taking such a firm stance, there were other more pressing initiatives that required

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<sup>283</sup> Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan in 1982" 141.

his attention. Before Andropov could reconcile the competing demands of an unwanted war and his broader domestic and foreign policy agenda, his health betrayed him. His opportunity to extricate Soviet troops from the quagmire of Afghanistan was lost.

As the relationship between the Soviets and U.S. continued to decay and Andropov's health continued to deteriorate, the struggle for succession began again in Moscow. Whatever plans to resolve the Afghan war Andropov may have been developing, they were abandoned by his successor. Chernenko was not the least bit interested in the political and diplomatic approach espoused by Andropov for the war. As his political rival, Chernenko immediately moved in a different direction and redoubled the commitment to applying military pressure to win at all costs. The new General Secretary saw winning the Afghan war as an essential contribution to Soviet prestige, rather than as a threat to it. He was fixated on achieving victory from the outset, more so than his predecessors, and at no time gave consideration to withdrawal.

Under Chernenko the war in Afghanistan essentially began anew. Indeed, Chernenko equated Soviet prestige with his own legacy, and the Afghan campaign was simply his opportunity to cement that legacy. The method he chose was to increase the amount of punishment doled out by the Soviet military, with no consideration for the collateral military damage or political impact of the upswing in violence he ordered. The civilian casualties, the significant increase in refugees, and the accompanying increase in Afghan hatred for the Soviet Union were, in his mind, acceptable cost of winning such a war. Instead of bringing victory, this strategy wrought a more significant blow to Soviet prestige. Chernenko had dismissed the negative reports that began to trickle into Moscow from senior military leaders in Kabul. He focused his attention on the more positive reports of his political officers. Although his dismissal of the negative military reports was not out of the ordinary, the over-emphasis on positive reporting of his political officers only created greater distance between civilian and military leaders. The coup de grace for civil-military relations came with the dismissal of the Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Ogarkov. Replacing him with a less capable and lower-profile general officer and preventing that general (Sokolov) from becoming a voting member on the Politburo spoke volumes to the diminished position and voice of the military in 1985.

The instability in the Soviet system from one General Secretary to the next in 1980–1985 prevented any political or diplomatic momentum from building. The first act of each new General Secretary was not going to be bringing home the troops and accepting defeat. After five years of conflict, the damage inflicted to the Soviets' international reputation far exceeded the destruction on the ground and casualties in their ranks. The Afghanistan campaign was also having a significantly negative impact on the prestige of the Soviet Army. The Red Army lost its image of invincibility. The image of defeat slowly imprinted itself into the Soviet public mind, including the minds of soldiers and officers who served in Afghanistan.<sup>284</sup> Both domestically and internationally, and in advance of the start of Gorbachev's rule, the Soviet Union suffered far beyond what they expected or yet even fully understood. Domestically, the war was no longer a source of pride, and internationally the powerful nation had become a true pariah. It would be left to the next General Secretary to extract the Soviet Union from the morass that was Afghanistan. Gorbachev would find the same stubborn political orthodoxy and the steady inertia that had overtaken the Soviet system of decision making. The result was a Politburo firmly against making an unceremonious---and what they considered would be a shameful---exit from Afghanistan. The new General Secretary was to make withdrawal from Afghanistan one of his first priorities. He would find that even the powers of General Secretary were not enough to right the ship that was the Soviet system from a storm that had long ago forced it onto the rocks.

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<sup>284</sup> Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 247.

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## **VI. GORBACHEV'S QUEST FOR "RELUCTANT, SILENT AGREEMENT" TO WITHDRAW FROM AFGHANISTAN (1985)**

When Gorbachev took over as General Secretary in March 1985, his agenda was to modernize the Soviet economy so that the communist regime might sustain itself and its international prestige. However, before the new General Secretary could do this, he had first to resolve the situation in Afghanistan. In the wake of Chernenko's death, Gorbachev sought to re-evaluate Moscow's Afghan commitment. He had been skeptical of the Afghan project from the outset, and his pessimism about its future followed him as he assumed the office of General Secretary. Disturbed by the failure of the Soviet military to consolidate gains after five years of fighting and unmet promises, he was anxious to withdraw Soviet forces. Nevertheless, he preferred to move slowly on Afghanistan, and settle into office by first dealing with other less contentious issues. He was not yet, nor could he afford to be, the visionary and radical reformer he would later become, so initially he deviated very little from existing Afghan policy and strategy. He needed time to build his team and consolidate his position.<sup>285</sup> In the meantime, he gave the Soviet military leaders another year to resolve the Afghan problem, a period marked by the continued political disintegration of Afghan institutions under the continued weak leadership of Babrak Karmal.<sup>286</sup>

Gorbachev first met Babrak Karmal shortly after taking office. At that meeting, the General Secretary strongly encouraged Karmal to expand the PDPA's base of support and attract more Afghans in order to stabilize the situation on the ground. When Karmal demurred at these suggestions, Gorbachev flatly stated that Soviet troops "would not be in Afghanistan forever." Although he did not specify a timetable for withdrawal, the implication should have been clear to the Afghan leader. As it happened, Karmal had

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<sup>285</sup> Gorbachev's closest advisers on Afghanistan were Eduard Shevardnadze (who succeeded Gromyko as Minister of Foreign Affairs), Victor Chebrikov (the head of the KGB), and General Valentin Varennikov (the head of the Ministry of Defense Operating Group in Afghanistan).

<sup>286</sup> Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 194.



indeed thought that Soviet troops would remain in Afghanistan for many more years to come.<sup>287</sup>

#### **A. GORBACHEV'S POLITICAL OBJECTIVES**

The Soviets' original 1979 plan for intervention had specified only that they would move quickly to replace Afghan leadership, swiftly stabilize the situation, and then depart. There was no contingency plan if the situation could not be stabilized. Each General Secretary pressed forward with the hope that the war would not continue much longer. Gorbachev's challenge was to balance his strong commitment to ending the war with the risk to the Soviets' reputation in the Third World if Moscow were seen to retreat short of "victory." He believed that even a phased withdrawal would result in the perception that the Soviet Union had been defeated. As a consequence, he believed that the military had to establish some level of stability in Afghanistan before it could leave.<sup>288</sup>

Despite Gorbachev's convictions about the requirement to end Soviet participation in the war in Afghanistan, he did not initially have a strategy to do so. He simply ordered the Afghanistan Commission, which now included Marshal Sokolov (Minister of Defense), Gromyko, and Chebrikov, to review the formal policy. He also asked them to consider "the consequences, plusses, and minuses of a withdrawal."<sup>289</sup> Even after Gorbachev finally secured the Politburo's support in October to work toward a withdrawal, he was cautious about developing his formal policy. He preferred instead to test different stabilization proposals before fully committing to withdrawal. Alternative policies involving the abandonment of a pure PDPA regime and the acceptance of an opposition government were simply too politically charged for him to consider so early in his tenure.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 82.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 74–75. Also a major theme in Kalinovsky's *A Long Goodbye*.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>290</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 90–91.

That Gorbachev also pursued diplomatic alternatives was hardly surprising. The stamina and intensity of the Afghan resistance was growing in 1985, largely as a result of the Reagan Administration's NSDD 166. This directive has been regarded by some as "the turning point of the war." NSDD 166 set U.S. objectives and gave high-tech weapons to the Mujahidin to break the stalemate in Afghanistan.<sup>291</sup> Interestingly, U.S. support for the Afghan resistance actually strengthened the General Secretary's determination to end the occupation.<sup>292</sup>

## **B. STRAINED CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONSHIP**

The conspicuous absence of any military representatives among the senior leaders at Chernenko's funeral reflected great strains that had developed in the Soviet civil-military relationship. Gorbachev lacked familiarity with military affairs or experience in dealing with military leaders. He also had an ambitious agenda that threatened to put him at odds with military leaders and more conservative Party leaders. Essentially, Gorbachev wanted to defuse tensions with the West in order to refocus resources and attention on the Soviet economy. He sought to bring exactly that new kind of political thinking to bear in both the economic and the military realms.

Gorbachev's initial intent was not to proceed in narrow decision-making channels. Instead, he encouraged competing views on the major issues and public debate over the fundamentals of Party policy. He wanted intellectuals from different sectors of the CPSU to discuss a wide spectrum of policy issues with those who traditionally controlled these areas. Members of the General Staff suddenly found themselves facing challenges to their authority on defense matters. Other key state organizations now gained an equal voice at the policy table; the Foreign Ministry and the KGB, for example, had a much stronger voice in high-level deliberations than before. There was suddenly

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<sup>291</sup> Peter Schweitzer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 214

<sup>292</sup> Rubin, 181.

very little sympathy in the Politburo for the military's plea for resources. The Defense Ministry found itself on the defensive in the Kremlin.<sup>293</sup>

Gorbachev's primary goal always remained economic revitalization. Some scholars have suggested that he recognized that there were two major obstacles to Soviet economic restructuring. First, the economic-planning bureaucracy adamantly resisted changes that were crucial for the state's survival. Second, the leadership had to bring the military budget under control.<sup>294</sup> Gorbachev decided to address these problems directly. Glasnost (openness) was meant to put pressure on the economic-planning bureaucrats to accept perestroika (restructuring). In addition, Gorbachev wanted accountability and a system to determine both rewards and sanctions. For instance, economic restructuring required a shift of financial resources from the defense industry spending to the domestic economy. To bring about this shift, Gorbachev had to confront not only his generals but also the industry's civilian leaders, who had long been able to get their way in the political struggle for funding.<sup>295</sup>

Gorbachev felt no compulsion to follow the Party tradition, established under Brezhnev, of preferentially protecting the military.<sup>296</sup> Unlike every General Secretary before him, Gorbachev had never seen the horrors of war or felt the survival of the Soviet state at risk. He made clear in his words and his actions that the institutional memory of the great victory of the Red Army over the Germans had little to do with the current struggle.<sup>297</sup> The civil-military divide grew in this pivotal first year, but the strain in relations between Gorbachev and the military would soon get much worse.

The Soviet military had enjoyed unchallenged prestige for more than 40 years, since its defeat of Germany in World War II. The ongoing debacle in Afghanistan damaged that image. Prior to Gorbachev, every Soviet leader had either served in the

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<sup>293</sup> Parrott, 76. In mid-1987, although a number of Politburo civilians had done short prior stints in military-related occupations, only 15% of the members had extensive military-related work experience, compared with about 25% in 1978 and 32% in 1966.

<sup>294</sup> Stephen M. Meyer, "The Sources and Prospects of Gorbachev's New Political Thinking on Security," *International Security*, Vol.13, No. 2, Fall 1988, 128–129.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Nichols, 130.

<sup>297</sup> Parrott, 78.

military or worked closely with it as they acquired power. Gorbachev lacked any emotional or political ties to the institution. More to the point, he was actually quite critical of the military:

Gorbachev's long struggle with his military leadership appears to have begun early in his regime. In 1985, at a meeting with the high command in Minsk, he evidently warned them that radical changes would have to come and the General Staff reportedly reacted with 'shock and horror.' Four years later Gorbachev commented that he was shocked by the state of Soviet defense when he came to power. Despite the 'energy and riches' expended on the armed forces, the military, he said, was scarcely able to guarantee the country's security, and the situation surrounding the armed forces was 'fraught with danger.' Corruption and protectionism in the officer corps were widespread, according to Gorbachev, and officers who lacked well-placed parents were subject to discrimination.<sup>298</sup>

The military initially viewed Gorbachev's restructuring as a necessary evil, equating it with a greater commitment to modernization. Indeed, some senior officers believed restructuring was necessary in order to keep pace with Western technological advances. But their support soon disappeared when Gorbachev's first economic reform policies did not include a technological defense dividend. From military leaders' perspective, not only did the chance to succeed in Afghanistan thereby vanish but, more importantly, the ability to counter the looming threat from the West dissipated.

It had become almost a reflexive requirement for new General Secretaries, as a condition for their survival in office, to give the military a chance to succeed in Afghanistan, ask what else it might need to get the job done (short of sending in more troops), and exhort it to try harder. In a sense, Gorbachev proved no exception---except that he was buying time to engineer a withdrawal.

Part of that effort included addressing the weak Afghan political leadership. During Gorbachev's first meeting with Karmal, he realized almost immediately that a change in leadership would have to be made if any political progress was to be achieved. Gorbachev was again constrained by expectations. He needed to grant Karmal an opportunity to show improvement after issuing him a warning. Unfortunately for Karmal,

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<sup>298</sup> Gelman, *Gorbachev's First Five Years in the Soviet Leadership*, 86.

Gorbachev lived longer than any of his predecessors. He thus had the opportunity to follow through on his threats the following year. Still, Gorbachev felt the same pressures to exercise patience that all General Secretaries had felt in their first year. Gorbachev could not act precipitously either to withdraw troops or to replace Karmal without banking sufficient political capital first. Otherwise he would have put the rest of his political agenda at risk.

As Gorbachev started the hard political work of developing a consensus in the Soviet Union for withdrawal, he firmly adhered to the communist party line of “no retreat” internationally. He confronted leaders, like Pakistan President Zia, who he knew were providing support to the Afghan resistance and spoke publicly on the importance of an international diplomatic solution. Privately he well understood that the Soviet military needed at least another year to achieve success or it would quickly shift the blame for “failure” on him after an ordered withdrawal.

### **C. MILITARY APPROACH AND STRATEGY**

In 1985, almost 110,000 Soviet troops were still in Afghanistan. Gorbachev approved a rotation of 73,000 fresh troop replacements in hopes of reinvigorating the flagging mission without having to increase the end strength. Soviet generals in Afghanistan then began a series of significant offensive operations that would continue during his first year. The outward purpose of this effort was to make a final push to win the war.<sup>299</sup> In reality, Gorbachev had already given up on the idea of achieving victory and instead was concerned most about gaining an upper hand for negotiations in Geneva. General Mikhail Zaitsev, one of the Soviets’ best military commanders, was appointed to take over the Afghan mission. By May 1985 the Soviets had strong military leadership on the ground and were able to launch their largest assault yet against resistance bases in the border region of Pakistan. Zaitsev was given a free hand to employ even more aggressive measures.

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<sup>299</sup> Russian General Staff, 26–27.

In military terms, Gorbachev's first year was marked by stepped-up air operations (by both attack helicopters and jet bombers) as well as major ground offensives against resistance strongholds and supply lines.<sup>300</sup> The Afghan resistance managed to survive the onslaught, nonetheless, partly because they had significantly improved their arsenal and tactics.<sup>301</sup> The rebels demonstrated an ability to face Soviet forces in direct combat for the first time in the war. Combat incidents rose to two hundred per month, which reflected both an increase in the Soviets' operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and the advances being made by the Afghan resistance.<sup>302</sup>

At the very time when Soviet forces were increasing their OPTEMPO the complex logistical-support network out of Pakistan began to function more effectively. This reinvigorated resistance efforts in the summer of 1985. Afghanistan's home-grown resistance began to welcome volunteer fighters from around the Islamic world who were answering the call to jihad at this same point.<sup>303</sup> The Soviets had become skilled at fighting in the mountains and maintained a substantial advantage over the resistance in terms of direct combat on the ground, but in every case these engagements proved costly in terms of casualties. Though these successful "tactical engagements" were multiplying, the casualties and fatigue of Soviet commanders were increasing as well. Indeed, Soviet military leaders began to fear that the fighting would go on indefinitely.<sup>304</sup>

#### **D. INITIAL MOVES TO WITHDRAW**

In July 1985, the Soviets completed their comprehensive Afghan policy review. This led to immediate changes and coincided with the removal of Gromyko and the installation of Eduard Shevardnadze. Over the next two months, Shevardnadze, who shared Gorbachev's views on the futility of continued occupation, developed a diplomatic proposal for the United Nations to consider at the next round of negotiations in Geneva.

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<sup>300</sup> Khan, 89.

<sup>301</sup> Russian General Staff, 30.

<sup>302</sup> Goodson, 65–66. There were 217 combat related incidents took place in the 29 provinces in 1985.

<sup>303</sup> Tanner, 265.

<sup>304</sup> Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making," 61.

The aim of the proposal was to reduce the influence of the Afghan government at negotiations and commit the Soviet Union to a clear withdrawal timetable.<sup>305</sup>

Gorbachev's predecessors had felt personally responsible for the war because they were involved in the decision to invade Afghanistan. Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze felt no such responsibility; in fact, they first heard about the invasion on the radio.<sup>306</sup> Gorbachev later said that, on his first day in office, he wrote himself a note that Soviet troops had to leave Afghanistan. Thus, even if it required defending existing Soviet policy toward Afghanistan until he succeeded, he was nonetheless devoted to developing a political consensus for a withdrawal.<sup>307</sup>

Also critical to Gorbachev was maintaining the Soviet Union's reputation in the Third World. He had to reassure friendly nations about Soviet commitments to them. He recognized that, without significant diplomatic sleight of hand, even a carefully calculated withdrawal would result in the international perception of it being a Soviet defeat. To pull this off it was essential that there be at least a modicum of stability in Afghanistan before the Soviets departed. This is where the issue of Karmal took on added weight---the General Secretary knew he had to provide Afghanistan with strong leadership or else stability of any kind would never be achieved.

It was not until October 1985 that Gorbachev finally felt he had the political clout to take control and proceed with plans for a withdrawal. He began by substantially downgrading Moscow's political objectives and transmitted this news to Babrak Karmal. Gorbachev summoned Karmal to the Soviet Union and spoke candidly about his concerns: the Afghan revolution did not have enough popular support, and the Soviets needed to adopt a new approach. He recommended that Karmal "give up all ideas of socialism" and instead "return to free capitalism, to Afghan and Islamic values, to sharing power with oppositional and even currently hostile forces."<sup>308</sup> This must have been the

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<sup>305</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 189.

<sup>306</sup> Oberdorfer, 237.

<sup>307</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 82-83.

<sup>308</sup> Halliday, 683.

first time a Soviet leader had ever urged a client state to turn to capitalism and religion as a means to stabilize its government.

Gorbachev also warned Karmal that Soviet troops would soon leave Afghanistan, and informed him of the intent to withdraw Soviet troops by the following summer. After that, Afghans would have to “defend the revolution” themselves. The Afghan intelligence chief and Karmal’s eventual successor, Mohammad Najibullah, attended this meeting and said that Karmal’s face went white.<sup>309</sup> The shocked Afghan leader shouted, “If you [Soviets] leave now, next time you will have to send a million soldiers!”<sup>310</sup> Gorbachev told Politburo colleagues on November 17, 1985 that Karmal “in no way expected such a turn, was sure that we need Afghanistan more than he does, and was clearly expecting that we would be there for a long time, if not forever.”<sup>311</sup>

After briefing his colleagues on his conversation with Karmal, Gorbachev read aloud from letters Soviet citizens had sent to the Central Committee. Some expressed grief over crippled soldiers and lost sons. Others blamed the Soviet leadership directly: “The Politburo made a mistake, and it should be rectified, the sooner the better, because every day is taking lives.” By reading aloud letters written by Soviet citizens Gorbachev shrewdly raised the emotional tension, while clearly conveying the extent to which public tolerance for the war had ended. He concluded: “With or without Karmal, we will follow this line firmly, which must, in a very brief time, lead to our withdrawal from Afghanistan.” Thus, after nearly a year, while the war in Afghanistan raged on and Soviet casualties mounted, Gorbachev finally found himself in a position where he could gain broad support from his Politburo colleagues to work toward a formal withdrawal.<sup>312</sup> As recorded by Anatoly Dobrynin, the Politburo’s reaction after months of having their attitudes shaped by the General Secretary seemed to justify Gorbachev’s initially cautious

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<sup>309</sup> Mohammad Najibullah took over as President of Afghanistan in May of 1986.

<sup>310</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 83–84.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962–1986* (New York: Times Books, Random House, 1995), 447.



approach: “There was no objection and no strong endorsement, but rather reluctant, silent agreement.”<sup>313</sup>

The November 1985 Politburo meeting simply represented a first step. The decision to withdraw in principle required a strategy. But, Gorbachev had not yet formulated a plan.<sup>314</sup> He spent the next three years refining his approach for how to shepherd the war to an end. Even though he had recognized early that the Soviet Union could not succeed in Afghanistan, he could not easily accept the appearance of failure. He and his Politburo colleagues were gravely concerned that other Communist countries would see the Soviet Union walk away from a critical, if inept, “liberation movement.”

The United States and its allies were set on denying Gorbachev either the substance or the semblance of success in Afghanistan. Their already substantial and still growing international investment in the Afghan resistance pressured Soviet military forces right up until the final withdrawal. In Gorbachev’s first year in office, United States support to the mujahideen reached nearly a half-billion U.S. dollars, which was more money than had flowed in during all the previous years combined.<sup>315</sup> Afghan fighters were thus able to launch an increasing number of ground attacks on Soviet forces. These attacks became dramatically more lethal with the introduction of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles in the fall of 1985, even though the full military effects would not be felt until 1986.<sup>316</sup>

The dramatic impact of Stinger missiles on the Soviet military is well established, but the steadily increasing investment in other aspects of the mujahideen effort is less well known. This growing investment is perhaps more significant, since the funding allowed Afghan resistance fighters to sustain themselves in logistical terms well into the future. Enhanced weaponry clearly emboldened elements of the Afghan resistance to increase their attacks on Soviet and Afghan government troops, particularly once they could effectively target attack helicopters. The success of the Afghan resistance on the

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making,” 61–62.

<sup>315</sup> Tanner, 263.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

ground provided President Reagan and the U.S. Congress with sufficient political capital to keep increasing aid for these “freedom fighters.” This sizeable increase in American funding was matched by an increase in international cooperation (principally Pakistan, China and Egypt) and a firm international commitment to press forward until the Soviets agreed to withdraw.<sup>317</sup>

As the next chapter will describe in detail, after his first cautious year Gorbachev would embark on a bold course to end the war in Afghanistan. In the process, he would transition the Soviet military from its former position of prestige to one of national disappointment. He would threaten the Politburo with the most compelling weapon of all ---a similar loss of stature. By reading out loud to his Politburo colleagues the letters from soldiers’ mothers he had carefully raised the emotional temperature. Although orthodox communists were not accustomed to concerning themselves with the public’s sentiments, Gorbachev’s program of glasnost had let the genie of openness out of the bottle. He simply prevented his colleagues from ignoring the Soviet people any longer and in his second year in power he forced the Politburo to act.

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

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## **VII. GETTING OUT: GORBACHEV AND THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN (1986–1989)**

We would like in the nearest future to bring the Soviet forces---situated in Afghanistan at the request of its government---back to their homeland.

**---Mikhail Gorbachev  
at 27th Soviet Communist Party Congress, February 26, 1986**

Mikhail Gorbachev inaugurated his tenure as General Secretary by giving the Soviet military establishment one year to bring the war in Afghanistan to a favorable conclusion. During that year, the intensity of fighting grew as military commanders struggled to deliver a decisive blow to the insurgency.<sup>318</sup> By his second year, however, Gorbachev recognized that a Soviet military victory in Afghanistan was a chimera, and began to explore an expeditious political exit from the war.<sup>319</sup> On February 26 1986, in a dramatic presentation to the 27th Soviet Communist Party Congress, Gorbachev made his case for war termination. Afghanistan, he told them, was a “bleeding wound.” The protracted conflict was damaging Soviet morale and political will. The Soviet military had forced resistance fighters onto the defensive, but the political struggle for Afghanistan was irretrievably compromised. The Afghan people and international opinion unequivocally supported a resistance that, although beleaguered, endured in the mountains and villages with grim determination.<sup>320</sup> He declared his intention to immediately develop a detailed timeline for withdrawal and he made clear that the Afghan government must prepare for a future without direct Soviet military assistance.<sup>321</sup> The central question addressed in this chapter is: what took him so long?

In 1986, the Soviet military continued to engage in a largely indiscriminate bombing of rural areas suspected of supporting resistance operations. The Soviet ground operations focused on stemming the infiltration of resistance fighters across the border

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<sup>318</sup> Tanner, 265.

<sup>319</sup> The first four months of 1986 alone averaged 329 conflict incidents (defined by a direct or indirect fire attack on either side) in 26 of 29 provinces which was higher than any previous year in the war. See Goodson, 66–67.

<sup>320</sup> Goodson, 67–68.

<sup>321</sup> Khan, 146.

with Pakistan. The Soviets also increased the tempo of operations in the northern provinces and expanded the scope of special operations forces across the country.

The Soviets' intentions were clear: they sought to pressure Pakistan to reach a political settlement.<sup>322</sup> During this period the Soviets began to violate the Pakistani and Iranian borders with air strikes, disruption efforts (spoiling attacks and raids), artillery attacks and sabotage. These cross-border incidents increased threefold in 1986 and continued until withdrawal in 1989, undermining every Soviet diplomatic overture. As the war progressed there were changes in Soviet military strategy as well. Toward the end of 1986 scorched earth operations in rural areas, emphasized under Chernenko, shifted toward sustained pressure in key urban areas. At the same time, major military offensive operations were reduced in scope in order to limit the overall exposure of Soviet troops in confrontations with the Afghan resistance.

Pakistan's support for U.S. objectives in Afghanistan was proving decisive in prolonging the war. Although technically a neutral country, Pakistan provided refuge and covert aid to the resistance. The Soviets had always been determined to end this support, but until Gorbachev came to power the United States had made that impossible. The aid provided by the United States to Pakistan represented a commitment to joint goals between the two countries in Afghanistan. The size of the United States' financial commitment made it impractical for Pakistan to consider a policy change, even had they been inclined to do so, based solely on the merits of any diplomatic discourse. Pakistan had its own objectives in Afghanistan (related to its rivalry with India).

In Moscow, Gorbachev's desire to withdraw had to be ratified by the CPSU. But that proved to be a hard sell among orthodox communists who insisted that the very topic of withdrawal be removed from the final Party Congress political report. The General Secretary did not object to this exclusion. Although Gorbachev placed a high priority on withdrawal, he did not yet feel politically secure enough to press the issue. Chernenko orthodoxy persisted even after the Party Congress adjourned.<sup>323</sup> In April, therefore, Gorbachev seemed to outwardly soften his determination to pursue an immediate

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 88.

withdrawal. In what appeared to be a reversal of his earlier stance, he explained to Politburo leaders that withdrawing from Afghanistan too quickly would damage the Soviet relationship with other client states.<sup>324</sup> Orthodox communist officials did not want to end the fighting short of a total victory because it might suggest that communism was not the wave of the future. Gorbachev would have to continue to build his case for withdrawal.

Occupying powers whose strategic position is eroding, as was the case of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, frequently face an unwelcome dilemma---either withdraw within a relatively short period and thus fail to achieve their declared objectives or prolong a failing occupation in the face of a population that becomes increasingly intolerant of the foreign presence. A typical sequence is first, the occupying powers recognize how much more difficult the mission is than originally thought; second, the challenges of occupation begin to multiply without any tangible progress toward sustainable success; and, third, the occupier is forced to confront the prospect of a failing occupation, at which point it can either cut its losses and withdraw, or remain and continue to grapple with the mission. At that point, regardless of what decision is made, the occupation has already failed.<sup>325</sup> The Soviets had gone through the first two of these stages by the end of Gorbachev's first year in power. The Politburo's inaction, despite Gorbachev's proclaimed decision to withdraw, was for all intents and purposes a decision to remain and continue to grapple with the Afghan mission. Orthodox communists clung to the tenuous hope that somehow the Soviet troops would turn things around. Gorbachev's "New Thinkers" realized that the mission could not be salvaged.<sup>326</sup> This policy vacuum created by disputes and indecision among the party leadership increased civil-military tensions.

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<sup>324</sup> Kalinosvsky, "Decision-Making," 61–62.

<sup>325</sup> David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 88–89.

<sup>326</sup> "New Thinking" was Gorbachev's slogan for a foreign policy based on shared moral and ethical principles to solve global problems rather than on Marxist-Leninist concepts of irreconcilable conflict between capitalism and communism. This definition is an excerpt taken from Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress Soviet Union Country Study as part of the Country Studies/Area Handbook Series sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Army between 1986 and 1998, available online at <http://countrystudies.us/russia/17.htm>.

By opening the door to the possibility of withdrawal, Gorbachev recognized he could harness both the growing public discontent with the seven-year war and the power of his declared policy of glasnost, which promised more openness and transparency in government deliberations, to bring pressure on hardliners in the Politburo. Specifically, mothers of Soviet troops killed or missing began a powerful letter-writing campaign to urge an end to the war. Thus, glasnost brought increasing popular political pressure to force the Politburo to be more candid in public about the war. Enlisting public opinion gave Gorbachev a margin of maneuver to confront the criticism and obstruction of his conservative critics.<sup>327</sup> To add to his political advantage, he worked diligently to enlist the United Nations to assist in developing a political solution. Talks in Geneva, which had been stalled since 1982, started to make progress in 1986.<sup>328</sup>

#### **A. NEW AFGHAN LEADERSHIP**

As public debate over the war began in the Soviet Union and the momentum for a political settlement grew, the Soviet General Secretary's most persistent concern was the weakness of the Afghan President. Babrak Karmal was utterly dependent on the Soviet Union. Gorbachev repeatedly warned him either to make radical changes or to face immediate Soviet withdrawal, but the hapless leader took no action, perhaps because he believed that Gorbachev was bluffing. And indeed, not yet able to follow through on the threat of withdrawal, the Soviet leader finally came to conclusion that Karmal had to go. Perhaps a new leader would make it possible to leave behind a neutral, if not friendly, Afghanistan.

The General Secretary articulated his frustration and feelings to the Politburo in late 1986:

**GORBACHEV:** In October of last year at a Politburo meeting, we adopted a line toward settling the Afghan question. The goal we posed was to expedite withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan and at the same time to ensure an Afghanistan that is friendly to us. This was to be achieved via a combination of military and political means. But there is no

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<sup>327</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 86.

<sup>328</sup> Goodson, 66–67.

movement along any of these directions. Afghan government positions have not strengthened. A nation has not been secured primarily because comrade Karmal hoped to keep on sitting in Kabul with our help. Our restrictions of the Afghan leadership activities have also played a role. Overall, so far, the planned concept has been realized badly. But the issue is not with the concept, but with its realization.<sup>329</sup>

It was this frustration led him to reevaluate both the Afghan leadership and Soviet strategic objectives. Fortunately, a more promising leader seemed to be at hand.

In April 1985, Mohammed Najibullah, Afghanistan's secret police chief, was elevated to the Afghan Politburo, a move intended to recognize his strong leadership. Spy chiefs, like Lavrentiy Beria or East German Stasi head Erich Mielke, had historically been prominent figures in communist regimes where the focus is on internal security.<sup>330</sup> It occurred to Gorbachev that this Afghan spy chief might be the answer to Soviet troubles. In May 1986, Gorbachev directed the exile of Babrak Karmal and replaced him with the savvier Najibullah. The new Afghan leader understood that success could not be achieved through military means alone and promised his Soviet masters that he would focus on compromise and reconciliation.<sup>331</sup> Given that the Afghan resistance had to fight with insufficient weaponry and no formal training, perhaps it would be open to a political settlement.

To be sure, the insurgents still had a strong base of support in the countryside, where more than 80% of the Afghan population lived and where the Soviets had been unable to extend political control. Nevertheless their superiority in firepower, especially in the form of carpet bombing by jet aircraft and strikes by attack helicopters, exacted a substantial toll on the insurgents and their supporters. By the summer of 1986, the Afghan resistance desperately needed something to level the battlefield.<sup>332</sup> At this point, the Reagan Administration rode to the rescue.

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<sup>329</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 13 November 1986, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC, file 89-14-41, fond 89, reel 1.993, Opisi 14, File 41.

<sup>330</sup> Collins, 133.

<sup>331</sup> Galeotti, 18-19.

<sup>332</sup> O'Ballance, 154.



## **B. INTRODUCTION OF STINGER MISSILES**

National Security Decision Directive 166 of 27 March 1985, “U.S. Policy, Programs and Strategy in Afghanistan,” was an escalation of U.S. support for the mujahideen that has often been presented as the game changer in Afghanistan and the event that began to unravel of the Soviet Union. This is, at the very least, an exaggeration if not a complete distortion. Whereas previously the CIA had funneled most support through Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), from 1984 U.S. operatives had begun to intervene directly in Afghanistan. Rather than a radical break with the past, NSDD 166 simply tightened the direct relationship between the resistance and the American intelligence agency. Also, in keeping with the directive’s admonition to aid the resistance “by all means available,” the United States introduced portable, infrared-homing Stinger missiles, a relatively new (1981) technology that allowed the Afghan resistance to target Soviet aircraft and helicopters. The effort to provide this capability began in earnest in late 1985, but a breakthrough came in September 1986. Richard Clarke, then the second-ranking intelligence official in the State Department, trumpets Singers as the breakthrough weapon of the Soviet-Afghan War:

We gave them SA-7s, like Redeyes, for a while. They didn’t work. We decided to add Stinger and a British optically tracked, wire-guided MANPAD in response to the Soviets increase in HINDs (attack helicopters). I tracked the HIND kills on a graph after the Stingers went in and it was dramatic. Eventually the Soviets stopped putting the HINDs in danger.<sup>333</sup>

The first point to note is that before mid-1987, only a few Stingers were deployed in Afghanistan. The total U.S. investment of weapon systems into Afghanistan was never more than 250 launchers and 1,000 missiles.<sup>334</sup> Nor did Moscow immediately or subsequently show undue concern following the introduction of Stinger missiles. Indeed, Gorbachev and other key Politburo members stuck to their original strategic objectives of ending military involvement, putting the Communist Afghan government on level footing, and then departing Afghanistan with a friendly regime still in place. That is not

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<sup>333</sup> Interview with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence (1986), The Honorable Richard A. Clarke 13 Dec 2009.

<sup>334</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 198.

to say, however, that the increasing effectiveness of the Afghan resistance, due in part to the introduction of Stingers, did not have an effect, for they put Gorbachev's objectives at serious risk.

The strategic impact of Stinger missiles was not as significant as U.S. officials claimed at the time. Gorbachev had already committed to withdrawal when the Stingers made their debut in 1987. The tactical effectiveness of Stinger missiles did force the Soviets to adjust their tactics while it made an already intractable situation worse. Until the advent of Stinger missiles, the Soviet Air Force and attack helicopters controlled the skies. Stingers significantly reduced this advantage, although they did not end it.<sup>335</sup> The Soviets stopped flying helicopters in the rural areas and switched to other less effective tactics to counter the insurgency. This provided some relief to the resistance fighters, and emboldened the Afghan population, who now could support the resistance without fear of helicopter-led reprisal. In effect, the Stingers unleashed the full potential of the resistance in a way that had been previously unachievable.<sup>336</sup> Archival data indicate the monthly average of 346 combat incidents in 26 Afghan provinces in 1986 was a 61% increase over the average monthly rate in 1985. The rate increased further to 416 incidents in 1987. Indeed, the rise in intensity continued right up until the Soviets withdrew.<sup>337</sup>

Nevertheless, the war in Afghanistan was, in military terms, a stalemate even before the arrival of Stingers, with both sides limited to inconclusive tactical victories. In late 1985, under General Zaitsev, the Soviets initiated more aggressive tactics, which put the resistance on the defensive, but failed to disrupt its supply lines. The Stingers gave the Afghan resistance greater confidence and freedom to maneuver, but did not displace

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<sup>335</sup> Reese, 165.

<sup>336</sup> Report of the 40th Army Headquarters dated 20 April 1987, in Alexander Lyakhovsky, *Tragediya i Doblest' Afgana* [*The Tragedy and Valor of the Afghan Veteran*] (Moscow: Iskon, 1995), [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/AfghanistanV2\\_1974-1989.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/AfghanistanV2_1974-1989.pdf) (page 258 of 463), as noted in the 40th Army Headquarters April 1987 report. "Insurgents operating in DRA are armed with 341 MANPADs, including 47 "Stingers." Compared to analogous period in 1986, the number of MANPADs doubled. Their use against Soviet and Afghan aviation aircraft and helicopters grew sharply. In 1984, 62 MANPAD launches were detected, in 1985 – 141, and in 1986 – 847 (26 aircraft and helicopters downed). During three and a half months of this year, 86 MANPAD launches already occurred (18 air targets downed). The effectiveness of insurgent use of MANPADs has also significantly increased: according to last year's results, the probability of hitting air targets was 3%, this year it is 20%."

<sup>337</sup> Goodson, 67–68.

any Soviet forces.<sup>338</sup> The introduction of Stingers complicated the Soviets' military challenges on the ground, but, based upon evidence found in the MALSE archives, they were not responsible for Gorbachev's decision to withdraw Soviet forces.

### **C. INITIAL DECISION TO WITHDRAW**

During a November 1986 meeting of the Politburo, well before the Stinger missiles caused any significant damage, Gorbachev expressed his commitment to the idea of withdrawing Soviet forces. This meeting was an important one regarding the future of Afghan policy and the eventual withdrawal, involving as it did the initial decision to establish a timeline for departure. At no point during this critical meeting did anyone mention the influence of Stinger missiles, or make any reference to the effectiveness of the Afghan resistance. Instead, Gorbachev only registered disgust at the cumulative failure of the Soviet military to succeed:

**GORBACHEV:** In Afghanistan, we have now been fighting for six years. Without changing approaches, we will be fighting there for 20–30 more years. This would overshadow our abilities to influence the development of events. We must tell our military that they have learned poorly in this war. What? Isn't there enough space for our General Staff to maneuver? Basically, we haven't found the keys to solving this problem. Are we going to wage war forever, signing off on our troops' inability to handle the situation? We must finish this process shortly.

**GROMYKO:** We must pose a strategic goal. Not long ago, we talked about sealing [the] Afghan border with Pakistan and Iran. Experience has shown that we have not been able to do this due to complex terrain and the existence of hundreds of mountain passes. Today, we must clearly state that the strategic objective is to move toward ending the war.

**GORBACHEV:** We must issue a statement on the necessity to end this war within one year---maximum two years.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Cordovez and, Harrison, 200.

Although the introduction of Stingers did not cause the Soviets to decide to withdraw from the Afghanistan, it did undermine any hopes that the military situation would improve any time soon. Gorbachev's disdain for the military's "inability to handle the situation" in Afghanistan was representative of his broader loss of faith in the institution. He no longer saw the military establishment as an important ally in his effort to bring reform to the Soviet Union. On the contrary, it began to appear as though (based upon his comments and actions) he saw his generals as obstacles to work around and through.

From a U.S. perspective, the introduction of laser-guided Stinger missiles was strategically the turning point of the war. From a Soviet perspective, it had little bearing on their situation, apart from heightening their frustration. More broadly, however, the increasingly direct and palpable U.S. involvement in assisting the Afghan resistance did influence the Soviets to reorder their strategic priorities. It was in this period (1986) that the Soviets abandoned the idea of establishing a stable client regime in Kabul before departing, and became reconciled instead to simply ensuring that they left behind a neutral Afghan government, friendly to the Soviet Union. That neutral government did not necessarily have to be a socialist one. Andrei Gromyko's suggestion that, six years into the war, the Politburo should finally define a realistic strategic goal was enlightening. He clearly stated the importance of neutrality and the urgency of ending the war in the November 13th Politburo meeting:

**GROMYKO:** Regarding the Americans, they are not interested in settling the situation in Afghanistan. On the other hand, they benefit from a prolonged war.

**GORBACHEV:** Correct.

**GROMYKO:** In a word, we must more actively pursue a political settlement. Our people will breathe easier if we take steps in this direction. Our strategic goal is ---to make Afghanistan neutral, prevent its transition to the enemy camp. It is also important, of course, to preserve as much as

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<sup>339</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 13 November 1986, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC, file 89-14-41, fond 89, reel 1.993, Opisi (finding aides) 14, File 41.

possible from the socialist perspective. But most importantly---to end the war. Agree. We must limit this timeframe to one-two years.<sup>340</sup>

The minutes of this extraordinary Politburo meeting illustrate the breadth of political problems that the Soviet leadership had not yet confronted. Edward Shevardnadze candidly shared his own opinions on how the current impasse had been reached, while stressing his agreement with the proposed timeframe for withdrawal. Wondering aloud how the strategic objective, articulated by Gromyko, would be realized without Soviet troops, Shevardnadze foreshadowed the coming Afghan civil war:

**SHEVARDNADZE:** Now we are harvesting the fruit of badly thought-out prior decisions. Recently, much has been done to settle the situation in and around Afghanistan. Najib came to power. He needs practical support, or we will suffer political setbacks. The timeframe for withdrawing Soviet troops must be clearly announced. You, Mikhail Sergeevich, named it correctly---two years. But neither our, nor Afghan, comrades have figured out how to make the state function without our troops.<sup>341</sup>

A number of other key leaders at this Politburo meeting then tried to express the futility of continuing the war at all, or of supporting the weak Afghan government any longer. Former foreign minister Gromyko noted that there were “as many draftees joining the Afghan army, as there are deserters.”<sup>342</sup> Sergey Akhromeev, Chief of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, agreed that Afghan forces being trained by the Soviets were plagued by low morale and desertion, and offered his own reasons for ending the mission:

**AKHROMEYEV:** Combat activities in Afghanistan will soon reach seven years duration. In this country, there is not one piece of land unoccupied by the Soviet soldier. Nonetheless, the majority of the territory remains in insurgent hands. The Government of Afghanistan has significant armed forces: 160 thousand people in the army, 115 thousand---in local militias, and 20 thousand---in state security organs. There is not one military objective that has been posed and not achieved, but there is still no result. The problem is that military results are not being reinforced by political ones. There is government power in the centers, but not in the provinces. We control Kabul and provincial centers, but on the captured territory we

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

cannot establish power. We have lost the fight for the Afghan people. Only the minority of the people support the government. Our army has fought for five years. And still even now it is capable of maintaining the situation as it is. But under these conditions, the war will continue for a long time.<sup>343</sup>

Gorbachev ended the November 1986 Politburo meeting with something approaching a directive for action (though perhaps not reaching quite that far). He outlined the evolution of the failed Soviet strategy in Afghanistan and downgraded expectations. He declared that his goal was that the Afghan government left behind should be “friendly” to the Soviet Union. And he elaborated on how the Soviet withdrawal should unfold, based on a preliminary timeline extending over two years:

**GORBACHEV:** We must move more actively, while clearly deciding upon two issues. Firstly within two years, our troops must be withdrawn from Afghanistan. In 1987, 50% of the troops, and the following year--- 50%. Secondly, a broadening of the regime’s social base must be undertaken...Negotiations with Pakistan must begin. Most importantly, keep Americans out of Afghanistan. But I think militarily the USA will not go into Afghanistan.<sup>344</sup>

Although Gorbachev’s timeframe proved to be overly ambitious, his statement clearly articulated an intention to leave, and completely: 50% plus 50% surely implied that all, or nearly all, Soviet personnel would be pulled out. Yet real action proved more difficult to achieve than the private rhetoric of the Politburo, meeting behind closed doors, would seem to suggest. By the end of 1986, there was a reduction of a token 2,000 troops that were no longer mission critical.<sup>345</sup> But even this modest move seems to have inspired renewed hesitation. The General Secretary and orthodox foreign-policy officials alike continued to voice concerns about how a failure in Afghanistan would damage the Soviet Union’s authority as leader of the Communist world and supporter of “national liberation movements.” Moscow had based the mission in Afghanistan on an unfounded faith in its ability to transform Afghanistan, stabilize the government there, and achieve broad international recognition of the Communist regime in Kabul. Such optimism was

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

prominent among Soviet representatives on the ground in Afghanistan, who sought to further their own ambitions by reporting isolated successes to the exclusion of the many problems. On numerous occasions, the Politburo agreed to extend the presence of Soviet troops to give them yet another chance to succeed. Yet no new methods for achieving success presented themselves.

### **1. A Man in a Hurry**

After the series of Politburo meetings in which Mikhail Gorbachev declared his intentions to expedite the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, he became a “man in a hurry,” and also a man carrying a burden he would very much like to put down, but cannot. In some respects his position resembles that of Charles de Gaulle, who assumed the presidency of France in 1958 determined to bring an end to the Algerian War, only to discover that it would take him almost four years to do so.<sup>346</sup>

Like De Gaulle, Gorbachev was eager to dispense with a war that had lost its original purpose, and had become a distraction from more serious matters. However, it would be inaccurate to portray the General Secretary’s drive to complete the withdrawal as tied to the loss of soldiers’ lives or a worsening of conditions on the ground. His primary concern was that the Soviets’ continued presence in Afghanistan was damaging the international prestige of the Soviet Union and their world standing as a superpower.<sup>347</sup> Further, the financial cost of the war made it a significant liability at a time when the economy of the Soviet Union was in serious and all-too-visible decline.<sup>348</sup> Also in decline was the relationship between Party leadership and senior Soviet military leaders. The initial optimism among military professionals during Gorbachev’s first year in office gave way to deep concerns over how his reforms threatened military investment, which in turn heightened the strains arising from the continuance of the Afghan war.

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<sup>346</sup> Alistair Horne, *Savage War of Peace* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), 507.

<sup>347</sup> Gorbachev, *On My Country*, 177.

<sup>348</sup> Russian General Staff, 26.

## **D. STRAINED CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONSHIP**

During his first year as General Secretary Gorbachev lost faith and trust in the military as an institution and in the ability of his generals to end the war in Afghanistan successfully. By late 1987, Gorbachev's reforms were already generating intense political conflict, since they required that defense spending be curbed, even while the war in Afghanistan continued to flounder. The military opposition to his vision became increasingly formidable, even though it was not linked to any coherent strategic alternative with respect to the conduct of the war itself or to the future viability of the Soviet regime.

Gorbachev's reforms, which became known collectively as *perestroika* [restructuring], raised the issue of what constituted a sufficient level of defense for the Soviet Union under conditions of severe fiscal and economic stringency. From the military's perspective, the fact that such an issue could be raised independently, in the highest levels of the Soviet government, constituted the most egregious civilian encroachment into the military's domain since the days of Stalin and Khrushchev.<sup>349</sup> The resulting chasm between Gorbachev and his generals also marked the end of attempts to coordinate political and military strategy regarding Afghanistan. The failure of the Soviet military to achieve gains in the theatre over the previous year only strengthened the General Secretary's determination to stifle their voice in policy development. Where the war was concerned, Gorbachev followed a course that he personally believed to be correct, with no input from his generals.

### **1. Era of New Thinking**

In international terms, the Afghan war had become a test of Soviet intentions and an opportunity for Gorbachev to renounce the expansionist policies of past regimes. Absent swift and convincing military success, withdrawal from Afghanistan became a diplomatic imperative, an indispensable step in overcoming the isolation the Soviets had endured since the invasion, and in stemming the resurgence of Cold War tensions that

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<sup>349</sup> Parrott, 80, and Nichols, 190–191.



had followed.<sup>350</sup> Gorbachev intended to usher in a new and brighter era at home as well as abroad.<sup>351</sup> Glasnost, the new openness that was always part and parcel of his approach to governance, met resistance in military circles for obvious reasons. The military establishment was accustomed to operating on the basis of decisions made secretly and unilaterally, supported by lavish spending whose scale was kept from the Soviet people. Not surprisingly, senior military leaders felt strongly that nothing good would come from suddenly being candid about a war they felt was naturally ugly, and one in which the path to victory had become difficult to describe.<sup>352</sup>

Gorbachev sought to base his defense policy on what he called “reasonable sufficiency,” that is, on a realistic appraisal of the full range of the USSR’s defensive requirements. He then used the media to initiate open discussions with the Soviet people about what this policy meant. From the outset, Gorbachev was clear that his highest priority was economic revitalization, an outlook that in the short term cut directly across the military establishment’s plans to modernize their aging arsenal.

Unsurprisingly, Gorbachev found it impossible to persuade his generals that it no longer mattered whether they won the current war (Afghanistan), or even created the capability for winning a future war with the United States. What mattered was preventing a larger war (with the United States), a point of view that the military establishment found difficult to accept, both for ideological reasons and because it implied a severe diminution of their institutional position in the state. It is here that the sense of being “in a hurry” in the face of an increasingly dire economic situation shaped Gorbachev’s approach most strongly. Rather than working patiently to win over the military establishment, he simply ignored their outcries.<sup>353</sup>

On May 28 and 29 of 1987, the Political Consultative Committee of the Warsaw Treaty Organization met in East Berlin to discuss the future of Soviet military doctrine. Such meetings were normally uneventful and resulted in only minor modifications to

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<sup>350</sup> Dorronsoro, 191–192.

<sup>351</sup> Parrott, 80, and Nichols, 190–191.

<sup>352</sup> Nichols, 165.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

Defense Ministry policy. This meeting proved to be very different. Gorbachev developed a document entitled “On Military Doctrine,” which the Soviet press published immediately following the East Berlin gathering.<sup>354</sup> This statement, which became known as the “Berlin Declaration,” contained six major proposals intended to pave the way for ground-breaking agreements with the West: a moratorium on nuclear testing, liquidation of all chemical weapons, reduction of forces in Europe, creation of a workable arms control regime, the creation of trust-building zones on land and at sea, and the eventual liquidation of the Warsaw Pact and NATO. The Declaration clearly reflected his personal interest in reaching out beyond the Soviet military leadership to generate support for his own programs. Although the West reacted suspiciously, the Soviet military establishment knew that the General Secretary was serious. They regarded his stance as an affront to what had historically been the military establishment’s prerogatives.<sup>355</sup>

As Gorbachev pursued his own agenda, civility between the Party and senior military leaders became the first casualty.<sup>356</sup>

Gorbachev’s impatience with the military was matched by the growing impatience of the military with Gorbachev. In 1987, civil-military disagreement became more than a matter of controlling defense policy, as Gorbachev allowed open criticism of the military. The ante had been upped as the military found itself, for the first time since the Great Purge, having to defend itself in Soviet society. This was, in military eyes, far beyond the pale of acceptable debate....The tone of civil-military dialogue had changed from tense to shrill.<sup>357</sup>

Under Gorbachev’s direction, the Party focused on preventing war and calming tensions with the West. These were not priorities that came naturally to the defense establishment. Defense Minister Sokolov refused at first even to agree that war-prevention was properly the primary tenet of Soviet military doctrine.<sup>358</sup>

Sokolov’s point of view was widely shared, but not universally so. The army chief of staff, Marshal Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeev, had opposed the Afghan war

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 178–180.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>358</sup> Parker, 171.

from the start, and he realized that supporting the General Secretary was the best opportunity to end it. In order to demonstrate his support of Gorbachev's aims, he revised the Military Encyclopedic Dictionary to bring it into line with the tenets of the new reform agenda: "the most important task of Soviet military strategy is working out the problems for preventing war."<sup>359</sup>

Nevertheless, Akhromeev was in no position to bring the defense establishment into line by himself. A good deal of new blood was called for, and to that end Gorbachev appointed General Dimitrii Yazov as Deputy Minister of Defense for Personnel. It was Yazov who became Gorbachev's point man for removing all Soviet military officers who did not support perestroika.<sup>360</sup>

A massive restructuring of the military ensued. Akhromeev foreshadowed the coming administrative purge in an article calling for an "influx of fresh forces into the leaderships' posts."<sup>361</sup> Among the first to go was Sokolov, who was forced to retire after 19-year-old German Mathias Rust flew from Finland in a Cessna aircraft which he landed on the edge of Red Square on 28 May 1987, in an act which exposed porous Soviet air defenses. Yazov was promoted to Sokolov's position. In engineering change in the military leadership, Gorbachev could count on support from two key Politburo allies, Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze and Communist Party Secretary Alexandr Yakovlev. Shevardnadze became Gorbachev's point man in what became a long struggle to further weaken the influence of the General Staff, and reorder Soviet political priorities to reflect the reform agenda.<sup>362</sup>

By 1987 the Soviet Army was a hollow force, demoralized by an 8-year war and by its declining influence in Moscow. New civilian-led institutions like the Defense Council, the Joint Committee on International Affairs, and Defense and State Security within the Supreme Soviet gained ascendancy with Gorbachev's blessing and wrested

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<sup>359</sup> Dale R. Herspring, "On Perestroika: Gorbachev, Yazov, and the Military," *Problems of Communism*, July-August 1987, 100–101.

<sup>360</sup> Harry Gelman, *Gorbachev and the Future of the Soviet Military Institution*, Adelphi Paper, No. 258, Spring 1991, Brassey's, 35.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Gelman, *Gorbachev's First Five Years in the Soviet Leadership*, 87.

control of the defense decision-making process from the military establishment. Military expertise no longer went unchallenged, and the General Staff found itself engaged in protracted debates over force levels, defense spending, and the value of military commitments abroad. Gorbachev institutionalized a system of oversight that permanently ended the days of writing blank checks to the military.<sup>363</sup>

The slow pace of change in Gorbachev's first two years gave way to increasingly radical approaches. He tied the success of his foreign policy to improved relations with the West, which provided an added incentive to withdraw from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, even while Gorbachev made clear to Muhammad Najibullah, and the rest of the world, that the Soviets were on their way out, the military leadership in Afghanistan continued to apply brutal pressure on the Afghan resistance. This oppression continued despite the clear political message from Moscow that reconciliation should be the new order of the day in Kabul.

## **2. Afghan National Reconciliation**

During the third year of Gorbachev's tenure, Soviet policy toward Afghanistan underwent the most profound changes since the intervention. The Politburo finally relinquished the orthodox view that even a neutral government in Afghanistan should be a socialist one. The emergent view was that Mohammad Najibullah's national reconciliation efforts must be expanded and that the resistance must be offered a share of power in Kabul. Gorbachev indicated that the PDPA should just be one of the parties in the Afghan government, and not necessarily the leading one. With a great deal of fanfare, Najibullah presented his national reconciliation program to the PDPA Central Committee on December 30, 1986. The program consisted of three primary tenets: a ceasefire with the Afghan resistance, a forum for dialog among all Afghan factions, and the development of a coalition government comprised of representatives from every faction, including the armed opposition. In his presentation, Najibullah made no reference to any Soviet withdrawal, which was the primary fear of the entire Afghan Central Committee. Not surprisingly, while this initiative enjoyed the full backing of the Soviet Union, there

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<sup>363</sup> Parrott, 77–78.

was very little support from stalwart Afghan communists.<sup>364</sup> Nor was Najibullah especially committed to the concept of sharing power with forces intent on overthrowing his government. As a consequence the reconciliation program proved to be simply a new means for the Afghan government to maintain Soviet support while averting Soviet withdrawal.

Najibullah's concern over Soviet withdrawal was well founded, as momentum for pulling out of Afghanistan was growing in the halls of the Kremlin. A memorandum submitted to the Politburo by a Gorbachev aide in early 1987 exemplifies the General Secretary's "New Thinking" on Afghanistan:

Our military presence in Afghanistan places an enormous financial burden on the USSR, and can lead to serious ideological consequences (the families of the dead); it damages our relations with the Muslim world, and gives the Americans an ideal opportunity to exhaust us by forcing us to wage an endless war. Of course, the withdrawal of troops and an agreement for some form of political settlement do not guarantee the survival of a socialist regime in that country. But however significant the survival of a socialist-oriented regime in that country is, in the end we will win. And the faster we leave that mousetrap, the better.<sup>365</sup>

"Winning" now meant leaving on terms that preserved the Soviet network of socialist client states. The New Thinkers understood that the costs of the war far exceeded the benefits that could be expected from the survival of the Najibullah government, and also outweighed the loss of Soviet prestige if they departed.<sup>366</sup> After all, the entire Soviet Union was beginning to unravel. This was not happening because of the war in Afghanistan, but the war was a distraction from much more important issues. Soon the Party leadership unanimously agreed that the war was consuming too much attention and too many resources.

Gorbachev's confidence in Najibullah, which the Soviet military knew was not warranted, made the situation worse. In the 15 months before the Geneva accords ended with a withdrawal agreement, Najibullah did very little to broaden the political base of

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<sup>364</sup> Khan, 188.

<sup>365</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 78.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

his regime, and failed to live up to the Soviets' expectations. His obstructionism and short sightedness did nothing to improve the strength of the Afghan government.<sup>367</sup> His top priority was in fact to delay and obstruct Soviet efforts for an orderly withdrawal. In this, however, he was ultimately unsuccessful.

### **3. The Geneva Accords**

The Geneva negotiations (May 15, 1988 – February 15, 1989) that finally ended the Soviet chapter of the war in Afghanistan had begun years before as diplomatic theater for Andropov. The talks stalled until Gorbachev came to power, when he immediately saw that they could create a framework for an honorable Afghan withdrawal.<sup>368</sup> Nevertheless, the fifth and sixth Geneva rounds, held in 1985 and 1986, were not fruitful. No real diplomatic progress was possible until Najibullah consolidated his hold on the Afghan government in late 1986. Even then advances were slow to materialize. During the PDPA's discussions on reconciliation, it became clear that leaders of the Afghan Central Committee still hoped that Soviet forces would stay. Najibullah and his supporters in Moscow tried hard to delay further talks in Geneva, and even sabotaged efforts by the U.N. negotiator, Diego Cordovez, to develop compromise plans that involved the PDPA sharing power.<sup>369</sup>

The seventh round of talks, which resumed in Geneva at the end of 1986, finally included a discussion on a timeline for withdrawal.<sup>370</sup> Despite Najibullah's delaying tactics, momentum swung toward striking an agreement. In January 1987 Gorbachev publicly announced that Cordovez' mission would succeed. The General Secretary had breathed new life into the Geneva process by setting dates and cutting through bureaucratic temporizing.<sup>371</sup> He made it clear that he would accept an imperfect agreement, so long as it set a course for Soviet withdrawal.<sup>372</sup> He hoped that ending the

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<sup>367</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 208–209.

<sup>368</sup> Khan, 281

<sup>369</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 246–247.

<sup>370</sup> Khan, 152.

<sup>371</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 239.

<sup>372</sup> Politburo Meeting, March 3, 1988. Hoover Soviet Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, op. 14, file 89–14–41.

war would illustrate to the world that he was sincere about the new course for Soviet foreign policy. As he told the Politburo in March, 1987, “[T]he country, the world is ready for us to do this. In politics it is not only what you do that matters, but also when and how.”<sup>373</sup>

Gorbachev was most concerned with the Soviet Union’s status as a superpower. He understood that there was no guarantee that Najibullah would survive in power after the Soviets departed, that a failed Afghan government would start a chorus of second guessing from political conservatives in Moscow, and that other socialist governments would suddenly feel vulnerable. Nevertheless, Gorbachev was determined that such apprehension should not be allowed to prolong the war any further. As he told the Politburo in early March 1988:

There will be questions, even in our country. What did we fight for? What did we sacrifice so many for? In the Third World there will be questions. They’re already coming in. You can’t depend on the Soviet Union, they say, it leaves its friends to the mercy of the United States. And here we must not budge.<sup>374</sup>

The round of talks in Geneva that ended in March 1988 produced a signed agreement that required Politburo approval before taking effect. In presenting it, Gorbachev argued that “it is hard to overestimate the political value of settling the Afghan problem. This will be a confirmation of our new approach to solving international problems. Our enemies and opponents will have their strongest arguments knocked out of their hands.”<sup>375</sup> Remarkably, every member of the Politburo voted in favor of signing the document.<sup>376</sup> By reaching an agreement instead of withdrawing unilaterally from Afghanistan, the General Secretary made ending the war a tool for his broader political agenda.

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Politburo Meeting April 1, 1988, Hoover Soviet Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, reel 1.993, op. 14, file 89–14–41.

<sup>376</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 140–141.

## **E. SOVIET DEPARTURE AND AFGHAN DESPERATION**

Gorbachev's political path from initial decision to withdraw to actual withdrawal was a long, meandering one.<sup>377</sup> The first stage began on May 15, 1988 and would continue for three months, during which time half of the Soviet forces would leave. Then there would be a three-month pause for redeployment and for clarification of future roles and missions for the Afghan Army. The second stage would then begin and continue for another three-month period. The withdrawal plan stated that by February 1989, there would be no Soviet troops in Afghanistan.<sup>378</sup>

Even after Gorbachev announced his plan, many Afghans still did not consider his declaration to be final. As late as January 1989, the Najibullah government sent urgent pleas for continued assistance to Moscow. The Afghan leader's persistent efforts to garner more support reignited tensions between Soviet civilian officials and military officers. Civilian leaders, especially Shevardnadze, sympathized with Najibullah. They contended that the withdrawal timeline was too quick, and they strongly encouraged the General Secretary to consider leaving behind a contingent of troops to help protect the regime. On the other hand, the Soviet military leadership was outspoken and passionate in their belief that the withdrawal must remain comprehensive and on schedule—a surprising reversal, perhaps, but one that, if nothing else, shows how deeply the frustrations of the war had finally worked their way into the bones of the Red Army.<sup>379</sup>

The question of what kind of last-minute support might be offered to Najibullah injected a final dose of heat to the civil-military friction that had built up over the previous three years. Although the war was over and agreements had already been made with insurgent leaders to allow safe passage of Soviet forces out of Afghanistan, the Politburo agreed to the 11th hour request of Najibullah to conduct one final military operation to set his government on the firmest possible footing. This operation, called Typhoon, was deemed a slap in the face by military leaders, who bitterly resented the idea of suffering additional Soviet casualties as a token of support to a government they

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<sup>377</sup> Savranskaya and Blanton, eds., 1.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 2.



were about to abandon in any case. To those in uniform, it felt like the last full measure of rejection and contempt from their own civilian leadership. And indeed their estimate of the cynicism involved was not far off. Gorbachev was only committed to Najibullah in so far as he needed the leader to survive long enough to prevent his downfall from being directly associated with the Soviet withdrawal. This is why he supported Operation Typhoon, and this is why he ensured the Afghan government would continue to receive financial support following their exit.

Interpretation of events as they unfolded suggests that the only role that the Soviet public attitude played in the withdrawal from Afghanistan was in applying additional pressure on a Politburo hesitant to get behind the decision (as when Gorbachev read the letters of grieving mothers and widows to his Politburo colleagues). Glasnost had brought a new awareness of the Afghan war abroad, and at home, there was an emotional backlash at the death of deployed soldiers manifest in the letters of family members. Still, it would be an exaggeration to play up public concern with Soviet casualties as a primary motivation for expediting a withdrawal. Financial, economic and diplomatic anxieties were paramount.

At this late stage, the Politburo's primary concern with Afghanistan was whether the Najibullah regime could survive on its own. A government document circulated internally summarized the tenuous political situation in Afghanistan in 1989:

This situation gives rise to several uneasy moments for us. On the one hand, a deviation from the decisions we have made and announced about completing our troop withdrawal by February 15 could bring about greatly undesirable complications for us in the international arena. On the other hand, there is no assurance that soon after our departure there would not arise quite serious threats to the regime, which the whole world associates with us.<sup>380</sup>

The Politburo transitioned to thinking that economic and logistical support might be provided after withdrawal but they were loath to risk further international outcry in the process. This was the conundrum facing Gorbachev. The irony was that although

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<sup>380</sup> Politburo Meeting 24 January, 1989, Hoover Soviet Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, reel 1.993, op. 14, file 89-14-41, on item YI protocol N 146 regarding measures related to the upcoming withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan , 2.

Gorbachev opted for immediate withdrawal, despite concerns about Afghanistan's political stability, the Najibullah government in Kabul survived the demise of the Soviet Union, but only by a whisker.<sup>381</sup>

The withdrawal from Afghanistan was by no means the end of problems that had developed between Soviet political and military leaders. Under Gorbachev, the cycle of civil-military relations spiraled downward to a nadir similar to, if less bloody than, the one following Stalin's purge.

### **1. Administrative Purge**

In December 1988, there was a watershed event for Soviet foreign policy and civil-military relations: Mikhail Gorbachev appeared before the United Nations and offered a unilateral reduction of conventional forces. This bold diplomatic maneuver brought about another round of criticism from a still-outspoken military establishment. Indeed, the very public outcry of the officer corps against this speech became the first real showdown between Gorbachev and his military critics. Gorbachev had hesitated to wield his full powers as Party leader over the military until 1988. But just as the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan, he fired all of his military critics.<sup>382</sup> The military's vitriolic reaction to his U.N. speech triggered this dramatic gesture. As Thomas Nichols writes in his book *The Sacred Cause*:

Gorbachev's 1988 United Nations speech, committing the USSR to unilateral arms reductions, was the beginning of the end of an era in Soviet civil-military affairs. Within three months, several high ranking officers would either resign or be fired, and the civilian leadership would make a dedicated effort to wrest control of the defense agenda from the professional military once and for all, even if it meant taking unilateral arms measures and committing the Soviet Union to them publicly. The Khrushchev pattern had come full circle, with Gorbachev announcing plans that, as would be revealed later, did not carry the imprimatur of the General Staff or the approval of the high command.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Najibullah resigned from office on April 16, 1992 under pressure from his own ruling party and was hanged in September 1996 by the Taliban in Kabul.

<sup>382</sup> Nichols, 203–04.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 206.

Gorbachev directed, and expert political hands Shevardnadze and Yakovlev provided substantial assistance in, the administrative purge. Together, they completely changed the nature of Soviet civil-military relations, so that civilians dominated all spheres of defense and foreign policy. Gorbachev's close relationship with these two senior officials allowed them to run roughshod over the military at a time when they were most vulnerable, following their failure in Afghanistan.<sup>384</sup>

Gorbachev's removal of Marshal Sokolov ushered in a wave of personnel changes at all levels of Soviet military command.<sup>385</sup> By 1989, Gorbachev had made six changes in the Ministry of Defense Collegium, which included the nation's top military leadership, including the Minister of Defense and his sixteen deputies. Gorbachev fired 15 of the 17 senior military members on the defense council. All the new generals were younger than their predecessors and known for their support of perestroika.<sup>386</sup> Gorbachev's actions were reminiscent of Stalin before him, though free from mass executions and exiling of officers to the Gulag. He replaced highly capable and experienced officers with much younger ones, who were professionally unprepared to assume positions of increased responsibility. Gorbachev was not interested in finding military genius in the ranks of his senior officer corps. He simply wanted officers who possessed what he considered the most indispensable trait, loyalty.<sup>387</sup> Those who were discharged or passed over uniformly believed that Gorbachev was denigrating all that they held sacred.<sup>388</sup>

Gorbachev's journey away from any form of collaboration had begun when he realized at the end of his first year in office that achieving civil-military consensus on Afghan policy, given his reformist goals, was impossible. He had become fixated on streamlining the governing process and moving beyond the inefficient and corrupt ways of the past. His domineering approach continued with unilateral reductions in military

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<sup>384</sup> Knight, 109.

<sup>385</sup> Savranskaya and Blanton, 2.

<sup>386</sup> Herspring, "The Soviet Military and Change," 325.

<sup>387</sup> Milan Hauner and Alexander Rahr, "New Chief of Soviet General Staff Appointed," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, RL 546/88, December 16, 1988, 3; and Sergei Zamascikov, *Changes in the Soviet Military Leadership Since 1987* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1990), 8.

<sup>388</sup> Parrott, 88.

strength and culminated with the purge, which stripped Gorbachev of his last military supporters, creating hatred among the senior officer corps that intensified right up until the August 1991 coup.<sup>389</sup>

## **2. The Impact of the United States**

Four years after the withdrawal, Gorbachev and some principal advisers told Selig Harrison, who had covered the Geneva negotiations for the *Washington Post*, that the most difficult obstacles to withdrawal did not originate in Moscow. Rather, Gorbachev and his advisers felt most resistance originated in Washington, DC. As Aleksandr Yakolev said to Harrison:

The American attitude undoubtedly prolonged the war. The United States gave us a kind of ultimatum to leave unconditionally. That made it difficult because we couldn't leave as if we were defeated. A different American attitude would have helped Gorbachev to deal with the pressures that he faced. We probably could have solved the problem during 1985, but of course history does not like the subjunctive mood.<sup>390</sup>

The Reagan Administration had shown no disposition to make concessions during negotiations.<sup>391</sup>

The United States was indeed influential in keeping the Soviets bogged down. American leaders intended to make the Soviets' life as miserable as possible for as long as they stayed there, and to make them pay in terms of world opinion when they left. The United States was able to pursue both these strategic objectives aggressively because the American stakes were always low. At the same time, the Politburo continued to believe that they could convince the United States to end their involvement in the Afghan war through a combination of diplomacy and compromise. They were incorrect. The commitment of the United States to extending Soviet involvement in Afghanistan as long

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<sup>389</sup> Nichols, 206.

<sup>390</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 245–246.

<sup>391</sup> In Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan* (page 245), Harrison recounts, "Talking with Gorbachev and his principal former advisers in March 1993, I found differences of emphasis concerning the strength of the pro-war lobby but general agreement that the most difficult obstacles to disengagement were not in Moscow but in Washington, Islamabad, and, above all, Kabul."

as possible became a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in the region, as laid down in President Reagan's NSDD 166.

Although there is no evidence that Gorbachev was aware of NSDD 166, the General Secretary identified the strategy of the United States as he reflected on the delayed withdrawal: "It would have been a very great stimulus if the United States had recognized that we were serious and had shown a desire to help us get out through the U.N. process. It would have facilitated the situation a lot in dealing with people who were causing difficulties."<sup>392</sup> Conditions in Kabul also mattered:

Remember that Karmal headed the Afghan government. He was a very particular personality, and he had his own agenda. In view of this, I am afraid that even with the backing of the United States we would have had a very difficult time. With Najibullah it was different. I don't think the world has appreciated what he did in bringing around his colleagues to accept my view. A person of lesser ability would not have been able to do it.<sup>393</sup>

Nevertheless, the Soviets replacement of Karmal with Najibullah became yet another reason to extend the Soviet commitment. After a visit to Afghanistan in 1987, Shevardnadze told the Politburo, "He needs our support in this."<sup>394</sup> Until the very end of the conflict the Soviet political leadership maintained a belief that it was their responsibility to continue active military support of the regime, and they maintained the illusion that these military efforts might somehow yield dividends.<sup>395</sup> This belief and illusion were not shared by military leaders.

Gorbachev's primary motivation for bringing an end to the war in Afghanistan was the damage it was doing to the international prestige of the Soviet Union and its standing position as a superpower.<sup>396</sup> He believed that continuing the Afghan mission would simply allow the West to exhaust the Soviet state by forcing it to wage an endless

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Politburo Meeting February 23, 1987, Hoover Soviet Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, reel 1.993, op. 14, file 89-14-41.

<sup>395</sup> Halliday, 683.

<sup>396</sup> Gorbachev, *On My Country*, 177.

war. He believed that ending the war would illustrate clearly to the world that he was sincere about the new course for Soviet foreign policy.

In seeking international political rewards, Gorbachev took internal political risks. If the Afghan government did not survive, there would be a chorus of second guessing. But if he could achieve an Afghan settlement that did not immediately expose the Soviet war effort as pointless in so doing he would strengthen his position at home and abroad.

There were allies and third parties to consider. The Politburo was unanimous in the belief that they could not abandon a floundering, communist regime without giving the impression that the Soviet Union did not stand by her friends when things got difficult. In April 1986, Gorbachev told a Politburo meeting, “we must under no circumstances just clear out from Afghanistan or we will damage our relations with a large number of foreign friends.”<sup>397</sup> He also said, in February 1987:

....we could leave quickly and blame everything on the previous leadership, which planned everything. But we can't do that. They're worried in India; they're worried in Africa. They think that this will be a blow to the authority of the Soviet Union in the national liberation movement. Imperialism, they say, if it wins in Afghanistan, will go on the offensive.<sup>398</sup>

The philosophy of *give it a little more time* had been passed from one General Secretary to the next. Even Gorbachev, whose priority was to regenerate the Soviet political system, adopted that attitude initially. His decision to withdraw was made against substantial opposition. The war ended because he directed it--the General Secretary was exercising strong leadership under great bureaucratic pressure.<sup>399</sup>

Nonetheless, Gorbachev was very clear that the powerful voices of orthodox communists had to be heard. He had lived through the succession crises following Brezhnev's death and had learned to manage the political environment in Moscow. Until Gorbachev, the orthodox communists had blocked all Afghan withdrawal initiatives. This obstructionism, together with the lack of any rapport with senior military leaders, delayed

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<sup>397</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 89.

<sup>398</sup> Politburo Meeting February 26, 1987, Hoover Soviet Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, reel 1.993, op. 14, file 89-14-41.

<sup>399</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 379.

the execution of Gorbachev's proclaimed intention to leave as soon as possible. When he came to power, Gorbachev faced the same dilemma that Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko faced when they had contemplated withdrawal. The fundamental problem was that there was no real strategy for withdrawal. The overly cautious political approach to finding a comprehensive strategy merely generated delays. Even after securing the Politburo's support to work toward a withdrawal in November 1985, Gorbachev moved cautiously to refine Afghan policy. Orthodox communist leaders convinced the General Secretary to give the generals a little more time to stabilize the situation before bringing Soviet troops home. The old guard's concerns over a loss of Soviet prestige proved irrelevant in the end for a regime that was in serious decline. Safeguarding prestige was a bad reason to stay. In fact, remaining in Afghanistan simply hastened the USSR's deterioration, which made the long-standing objections of the orthodox Politburo members to withdrawal all the more tragic.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Having lost in Afghanistan, we have to win in the world.

**---Mikhail Gorbachev, Politburo Meeting, April 18, 1988**

In early 1979, when the Politburo decided to intervene in Afghanistan, Brezhnev assumed that the intervention in Afghanistan would be brief and uncomplicated. By the end of the adventure in Afghanistan, after nearly ten years of fighting, the Soviets realized that they had accomplished very little. Like the British before them, the Soviets had moved confidently into Afghanistan in order to thwart challenges from developing on the borders of their empire. They never considered the consequences of a failed invasion, so that the decisions they made governing the war reflected confidence to the point of hubris. What was more interesting still, intervention actually degraded the political, strategic and military status of Afghanistan from Moscow's perspective, or at the very least, failed to improve it.<sup>400</sup> The Soviet war proved to be a political mistake, an economic affliction, and a strategic failure, which had dire consequences in a context of a USSR in the throes of systemic failure and faltering legitimacy.

By 1979, the Soviet system of governance was enduring the stress and stagnation of a flawed economic system, while at the same time dealing with both a crumbling satellite state and the perceived threat of U.S. encroachment.<sup>401</sup> Early in Brezhnev's tenure as General Secretary, the system had worked well for both the Party and the military establishment, because they were responsive to one another. When later in his tenure political authorities failed to heed the advice of military professionals, the generals might complain or voice concern, but there was very little they could actually do about being ignored. For example, the Politburo clearly understood that the military leadership opposed the Afghan invasion, but it was also perfectly understood that the military would carry it out, without obstruction, once the formal decision was made. Understanding that

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<sup>400</sup> Brian Robson, *Crisis on the Frontier: The Third Anglo-Afghan War and the Campaign in Waziristan 1919–1920* (Norfolk: Spellmount Press, 2004), xi.

<sup>401</sup> Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 8.



the military would carry out its orders, the Politburo did not query its generals on the viability of the mission or the appropriate force sizing for the invasion and subsequent occupation. Instead, there was simply a directive to utilize troops from the Soviet southern flank, who would be reinforced by Soviet troops already monitoring the situation in Kabul. The Politburo did not query the military because it initially trusted their military leadership to organize itself for success within the parameters they were given---namely a force ceiling of roughly 108,000 troops. In this case it was not a matter of undue arrogance on the part of the Politburo. Instead it was a case of failure to match ends to means. Nonetheless, there was no concerted effort to develop a civil-military relationship marked by frequent consultation. The Politburo appeared unwilling to pay whatever the price might have been to achieve stability in Afghanistan but, paradoxically, they were also unable to end their involvement in the conflict. A more appropriate or higher troop level in Afghanistan was of course not the sine qua non for success. However, the failure to discuss such options was perfectly indicative of the failure of what should have been an indispensable civilian-military relationship, particularly in a time of war. It is true that the military should operate within the parameters that are established by politicians, but when there is no productive and sustained consultation between the two parties, then success in a conflict is assuredly much more difficult to achieve. It was impossible to achieve in Afghanistan.

More frequent consultation between the Politburo and the Soviet military establishment might not have led to success in stabilizing Afghanistan. However, it would have led to a much quicker and concrete realization that success was simply not achievable for the USSR. When both sides arrived at this conclusion independently the result upon realization was not only failure but also irreparable damage to the relationship. As with the initial application of force, subsequent policy decisions in Afghanistan were based on political pragmatism, not on military need; and the political decisions were made without military consultation. As the substantial military challenges associated with fighting a stiff Afghan resistance became increasingly apparent, the senior military leaders well understood and accepted the considerable constraints the Kremlin placed on them and simply resigned themselves to following orders.

## **A. NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION-MAKING IN THE SOVIET UNION**

The secretive system of Soviet decision making, where ceremonial coordination occurred only to eliminate opposition to the elite's favored decision, undermined both strategy and political outcomes. The civilian leadership should have invited the military to speak freely, rather than stifle them in areas where their expertise was sorely needed. Civilian-military relations began well under Brezhnev, but deteriorated for a variety of personal and structural reasons in the context of war escalation, until they reached a nadir under Gorbachev.

The nature of the tasks involved in planning the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan inherently demanded a substantial degree of military input to inform the establishment of political objectives. However, this process was divorced from the establishment of a realistic political strategy. Military leaders were urged to keep their opinions about the resources required to stabilize Afghanistan to themselves and simply execute. The formulation of military strategy in Afghanistan was divorced from the pursuit of the initial political goal of changing the Afghan regime. It was allowed to develop without political oversight, and as the conflict escalated there was no effort on the part of the Politburo to bring the two together. Instead they allowed military strategy to morph from simply forcing regime change to countering stiff resistance. Soon the conflict bore no resemblance to the one envisioned in political terms before the invasion began. The military strategy that emerged in a vacuum forced new political objectives to develop. Policy proved to be a moving target. The question of what they were trying to achieve became elusive. Indeed, stabilizing an unruly Afghanistan was not a task that the Soviet Union was equipped to achieve or one they had any prior experience in carrying out.

The opposition to the war expressed by the senior Soviet military leaders at the start was not based on any appraisal of what was required to win in Afghanistan, but rather on a concern that a major commitment there would detract from the USSR's primary military commitment against the United States and NATO. Thus, although their initial doubts were vindicated by events, the grounds for those doubts prevented them from ever agitating for more troops. When Gorbachev finally asked General Zaitsev in

May 1985 whether the troop numbers were sufficient to succeed, Zaitsev clearly but equivocally stated they would need to double the number, an answer that was obviously calculated not to obtain more troops for the war, but instead to suggest that the whole issue was not worth discussing (as indeed it was not at that point). After all, it was not as though the military establishment understood how to win the war. They judged from the start that, however it might be conducted, the war could not be won on the basis of a limited commitment of resources, which both they and the civilian leadership favored, albeit for different reasons. It was on this precise point that the divergence of civil and military opinion mattered most in the Soviet case. It was not that the Soviet armed forces had a theory of victory that was ignored. It was that they recognized that, given the level of resources they themselves were prepared to commit, war itself should not have even been attempted. Yet, when ordered to proceed, it was their duty to try, and they did.

After 1980, additional discussions with military leaders would have helped the Politburo discover that field reporting from political advisers did not accurately reflect what was actually happening on the ground. Soviet political advisers from all corners of Afghanistan exaggerated progress and played down or dismissed negative trends; this was a poor basis upon which to make decisions. Senior Soviet political leaders were not interested in visiting Afghanistan to assess the situation for themselves, and when they did visit (as Andropov did twice before becoming General Secretary) their assessments were always discouraging.

Very early in the Afghan mission, two of the Troika members who orchestrated the invasion (Ustinov and Andropov) realized that it was a mistake. Yet, neither of them could find a reasonable way out, without---in their minds---doing irreparable harm to the nation. In February 1981, Ustinov wrote to fellow Politburo members that “no military solution to the war was possible,”<sup>402</sup> and so they needed to find a way out. This striking turnaround came after he had reviewed reports of military commanders and listened to their assessments of what was happening on the ground. Ustinov’s epiphany came a little

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<sup>402</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, 65.

over a year after he had championed the invasion and silenced military critics of the decision.<sup>403</sup>

When Soviet officials did seek ground truth, it led to harsh realizations. Indeed, after only a year of fighting, Ustinov had collected enough information to determine that the war was unwinnable. These isolated realizations could not serve as an effective counter-weight to the inertia of a government that had already committed to winning a war they, in large part, did not understand. The problem moved beyond Politburo leaders failing to listen to the military, and the unfounded optimism of political advisors, to the Politburo officials who realized their mistake too late and simply could not think of a way out.

With the exception of Gorbachev's first year in power, a small group of men in Moscow made all the policy decisions on Afghanistan, and often excluded dissenters from the decision-making process. During the early years of the war, powerful figures like Andropov, Ustinov and Gromyko could not be outmaneuvered. Policy changes occurred only when these leaders changed their minds. Broad considerations of power, status and worldview influenced their decisions, as did their perceptions of developments within Afghanistan, skewed as they were by overly positive reporting. The prevailing line was always that although problems still existed, the Soviets were making progress, so the right thing to do was to extend the Soviet presence in Afghanistan until the problems were solved. The issue of succession and power politics within the Politburo also played a role---any admitted failure in Afghanistan from a policy official would reflect poorly on him in the eyes of whoever might become the next General Secretary. The preservation of political position far outweighed the importance of candor.

Another factor that had a negative impact on the decision-making process with respect to Afghanistan was the weight assigned to sunk costs. According to classical economic theory, calculations of costs accumulated in the past should not weigh heavily in decisions about future commitments. A rational choice would be to consider only the

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<sup>403</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 38 and 63.

marginal benefit and marginal cost of future involvement.<sup>404</sup> The unrecoverable costs of the prior commitment should never have contributed to the Soviet decision to continue to commit to the failing mission in Afghanistan. In politics, however, sunk costs always matter. Thus a March 10, 1980 memorandum clearly stated that a Soviet military presence would be required for a long time as the key stabilizing factor. Another Politburo memorandum, dated April 7, 1980, argued that the Soviet Union had invested too much in Afghanistan to withdraw prematurely. The orthodox communist leaders' preoccupation with sunk costs persisted right up until the final decision to withdraw was made by Gorbachev.

## **B. WHY THEY INVADED**

After the extraordinary deliberations in March 1979 following the Herat Rebellion, it appeared that the Soviets had decided against invading Afghanistan. So the Afghan invasion in December of that same year came as a shock to the CPSU, especially because very few of the Party members had participated in deliberations and also because it involved such a considerable commitment. In the months leading up to the invasion, the Soviets believed that Afghanistan was at risk of being lost to the United States. The Soviet Union mistakenly thought that the CIA and Amin were developing a strong rapport, and so they felt a strong compulsion to act. The fact is that the Soviets went to war in Afghanistan in the shadow of their fears, rather than because of a palpable, imminent threat to their interests. The Troika thought the invasion would be as simple and as straightforward as the Czech invasion eleven years earlier. Brezhnev's stated objective in Afghanistan was to stabilize the Communist government and then leave--- which appeared very achievable to the Politburo.

Following the Sauer Revolution, the Afghan leaders requested direct Soviet military intervention 13 times. The Soviets failed to heed all of those requests, but then ironically, ended up invading the country unilaterally, murdering a leader who had sought their help, and taking control of Kabul by force. The Soviets calculated that the

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<sup>404</sup> Robert H. Frank, *Microeconomics and Behavior*, 2nd Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 242.

occupation of Afghanistan would take only a few months.<sup>405</sup> This was certainly Brezhnev's expectation. They anticipated finally installing some form of communist-led coalition government that would stabilize the explosive tribal environment. The international outcry against the invasion was immediate, yet the Politburo and Soviet General Secretary continued to see the invasion as a critically important strategic defense measure.

It is possible that nothing, including considering the receipt of sound military advice, could have averted military action once Amin ordered the execution of Brezhnev's favorite Afghan, President Muhammed Taraki. The Soviets had already targeted Amin for assassination, and his actions, together with the Politburo's determination not to lose Afghanistan to the West, made invasion a difficult option for Brezhnev to resist. In addition to the direct military threat, the Troika also worried about the loss of international prestige that would follow among Third World communist nations if they allowed the PDPA government to fail. In late November 1979, the Troika only needed the approval of an already angry Brezhnev in order to implement the plan. He granted approval after he read Andropov's carefully constructed memorandum recommending military intervention and brooded over Amin's assassination of Taraki. Orders to move three armored divisions to the south had already been issued by the time the Politburo gave formal approval to the operation in mid-December.

Notwithstanding the apprehensions voiced by the Soviet military leadership, the Troika ultimately felt compelled to confront a situation they had convinced themselves was spiraling out of control. In reality, it was the invasion itself that greatly accelerated the spiral.<sup>406</sup> Contrary to the perceptions of the Troika, the United States remained committed to détente. Despite KGB reports suggesting otherwise, Amin had not turned away from the Soviets. And regardless of Politburo fears that the United States intended to position medium-range missiles in Afghanistan, the West was simply not a military threat on the Soviet's southern border. More intensive consultations within the Soviet bureaucracy might have enhanced the leadership's appreciation of the facts. At the very

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<sup>405</sup> Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, 134–135.

<sup>406</sup> Arbatov, 230.

least, deeper consideration would have helped clarify execution of the military strategy. Andropov's two visits to Afghanistan during the first year of the war left him deeply disturbed by the ineffective Afghan leader (Karmal), the weak Afghan Ministries, and the inability of the Afghan Army to stand up to the resistance. One year into the occupation, even Brezhnev asked Ogarkov to look into the feasibility of withdrawing before the 1981 Plenum, but the General Secretary backed away from this course when he was apprised of the damage it would do to Soviet prestige. The Troika and General Secretary saw the invasion of Afghanistan as a pragmatic requirement. They had lost control of the Afghan government and felt that Soviet influence must be reasserted. Getting into Afghanistan to reassert their influence proved easy, while getting out without damaging their reputation proved elusive. The application of diplomacy to war termination was uneven, in part because, as often as not, the Soviets were negotiating with themselves.

U.N. negotiators in Geneva made significant progress before Andropov's death in 1984. The General Secretary identified what the Soviets believed was the true obstacle to progress---U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Before he died, Andropov told his Politburo colleagues that "the problem is not Pakistan's position. It is American imperialism that is giving us a fight...we cannot retreat."<sup>407</sup> The United States was a critical link in the diplomatic talks, but it did not want to give the Soviets an easy escape from Afghanistan, especially in the context of Cold War tensions in 1983. But the lack of Soviet political commitment to withdrawal was much more decisive.

For Kremlin leaders, the war had become a test of political resolve. Unlike other General Secretaries in the 1980s, Chernenko, Andropov's successor, did not even want to consider the possibility of leaving Afghanistan. He was unconcerned about diplomatic or political efforts, and simply "doubled down" in hopes of forcing a victory. The fact that he got the Soviets in deeper only contributed to the prolongation of the war.

Of all the General Secretaries of the 1980s, Gorbachev was the most inclined to leave quickly. Even after the Soviets decided on a broad goal of withdrawal in October 1985, there was no firm decision to exit until 1986. The Soviets declined every

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<sup>407</sup> Politburo Meeting March 10, 1983. Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC translation by Katya Drozdova, Fond 89, Reel 3, Op. 42, File 51.

opportunity to escalate and expand the war, and after Chernenko's interregnum they spent the next four years seeking an exit strategy, rather than continuing to pursue a military victory. Had they escalated by either substantially increasing troop levels or widening the war into Pakistan, then the conditions would have changed dramatically, with results impossible to divine. The unwillingness from one General Secretary to the next to reconsider Brezhnev's initial strategic priorities made exiting Afghanistan even more difficult. Andrei Gromyko inadvertently illustrated the Soviet Union's optimism cum naiveté at the start of the war, when at a November 1986 Politburo meeting he urged that the Politburo "pose a strategic goal" that was realistic, seven years after the war had begun. He admitted that previous strategic goals, such as sealing the Afghan/Pakistan border, were impossible to achieve. Gromyko thought the only worthy goal moving forward was to establish a friendly government in Afghanistan and depart---with emphasis on departing.<sup>408</sup> Attitudes in the Politburo had changed dramatically from 1979 to 1986. Even so, it would take three more years to get out.

The Politburo's limited political commitment to the war and its decision to keep the scope of it from the Soviet public were damaging. Condoleezza Rice suggested that the outstanding feature of modern Soviet strategy in the Second World War and the Cold War that followed was the Soviets' understanding of the importance of preparing the whole society for a long and continuous struggle.<sup>409</sup> Soviet political leaders saw the challenge of bringing order to Afghanistan as being so uncomplicated that girding the nation for a long and difficult struggle was unnecessary. In fact, they did not even inform the nation that a full scale war was going on. Presumably, the Politburo would have informed the Soviet people about the war if they believed it was important to do so---but they did not. If Brezhnev had chosen to mobilize the Soviet public behind the war, he would have had numerous policy options at his disposal at least initially, in addition to having the flexibility to commit more force and resources. But as both France learned in Indochina and Algeria, and the United States in Vietnam, initial popular support for

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<sup>408</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 13 November 1986, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC, file 89-14-41, fond 89, reel 1.993, Opisi 14, File 41.

<sup>409</sup> Condoleezza Rice, "The Making of Soviet Strategy," in Peter Paret's *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 675-76.



intervention quickly evaporates as the prospects for success become elusive. Public support at home was ephemeral at best when the problem lay in Kabul, not in Moscow. When he came to power, Gorbachev did see it as essential to engage the Soviet people and consider their sentiments in policy discourse, but only because he wanted the lack of public support to be clearly recognized by the Politburo members. It was not his interest to mobilize the support of the people for the war, a moment that he judged, correctly, to have long passed. Throughout the entire course of the war there was never any effort to mobilize the support of the people. The Afghan war was not a matter of national survival. It was an “elective” war to be hidden as far as possible from public view.

### **C. THE OBSTACLES THAT THEY MET**

Training the Afghan Army to become proficient enough to stabilize the Karmal government proved to be a daunting task. This was another case where self-imposed limitations put the Soviet military at a disadvantage on the ground. The number of Soviet forces committed to the effort made it impossible to train and sustain the inexperienced and ineffective Afghan Army. This Army numbered 100,000 in 1979, but a year later had dwindled to less than 25,000 as a result of mass desertions and defections to the Afghan resistance. It took six years for the Afghan Army to reach its post-1979 peak of 40,000 troops. This meant the Soviet Army was forced to shoulder the vast majority of the fighting during the war.<sup>410</sup>

The Soviets were also limited by their very specific idea of what was an acceptable government in Afghanistan. Ironically, it was the emergence of the Communist Party in Afghanistan that helped the Islamists mobilize and become a formidable force. If the Soviets had adhered more closely to their original objectives and purpose (stabilized the government and left), they might have been able to couple a declaration of success with an early departure. But they got bogged down in fighting and in political rationalizations, which prevented them from withdrawing. Although it may have been clear early on that stabilizing the government was beyond their capability, the

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<sup>410</sup> Reese, 166–167.

mission was nonetheless allowed to expand in scope without any corresponding increase in resources and troops.

Afghanistan turned out to be the least manageable corner of the Soviet empire.<sup>411</sup> The ability of the Afghan resistance to regenerate itself demoralized the Soviets, who soon learned that there were limits to conventional military power in Afghanistan. The place and its people simply confounded the strength and sophistication of their invaders. They fought like bandits when confronted with overwhelming force, and only attacked when the odds were favorable. It was impossible for the Soviets to discern whether they were winning the war or not, until it was painfully clear that they had lost. It did become obvious to individual Politburo leaders in the first year of the occupation that, despite a number of isolated military victories, they faced a long occupation and protracted conflict in order to keep their puppet government in power.<sup>412</sup> The paradox was that although a small Troika of Soviet leaders could get the USSR into a war, the same leaders could not get them out.

#### **D. THE CONSTRAINTS THAT THEY IMPOSED ON THEMSELVES**

There were two constraints to success that prevailed throughout the war. First, the borders of Pakistan were largely respected. The Soviets never seriously considered expanding the war beyond the borders of Afghanistan into Pakistan, although this would have greatly increased the pressure on the Afghan resistance. But, quite apart from the diplomatic consequences, it would also have overextended an already overstretched Soviet force. Early on, Brezhnev made a political decision not to widen the war, not to increase its complexity by operating on Pakistani soil, and not to risk the loss of international legitimacy for their client state. No subsequent General Secretary veered substantially from these parameters, and each preferred to avoid increasing tensions with the West. All Party leaders were unanimous in their belief that the Afghan war must remain limited in geographical scope. Indeed, it was limited in political aims and political commitment as well.

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<sup>411</sup> Holt, 73.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 76–77.

Second, troop levels remained constant throughout the conflict, as the Politburo and Afghanistan Commission never proposed, or authorized, troop levels above the initial baseline of 108,000. This was a fraction of the available Soviet troop strength of three million. If the Soviets had even doubled troop levels at any point, then there would probably have been enough Soviet and Afghan forces to hold the terrain secured during most of their major offensive operations. However, since the number was not increased, the Soviets regularly ceded control of key terrain seized to the Afghan resistance almost immediately after every large-scale operation.<sup>413</sup> Enduring military success was impossible to achieve under those conditions. The Politburo strictly adhered to these resource limitations even in the face of mounting casualties and a worsening situation on the ground.

Since the end of World War II, the Soviet military had been an ideological and organizational pillar of the entire Soviet system. They were inextricably intertwined with the legitimacy of the state, the command economy, and the overall health of Soviet society. The slow collapse of the military after the invasion of Afghanistan was, by implication, a tale of the disintegration of the Soviet system.<sup>414</sup> Gorbachev failed to understand that the military was as essential to the sovereignty and stability of the Soviet regime as it had been to the Czars.<sup>415</sup> The invasion of Afghanistan developed against the backdrop of other foreboding problems. The failing health of Brezhnev, the hubris of the Politburo, and a stagnant economy---all conspired to create the conditions for disaster in Afghanistan.

## **E. WHY THEY FAILED IN AFGHANISTAN**

Although the withdrawal from Afghanistan might at first sight appear to have been a result of Soviet military failure, this study makes clear that other, more decisive factors precipitated the real failure. The most important of these factors was the civil-military divide that grew ever wider through the life of the conflict.

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<sup>413</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 44.

<sup>414</sup> Odom, *Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 170.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

## 1. The Civil-Military Divide

The civil-military divide in the Soviet Union during the Afghan War, and the associated discontent among the military establishment, inevitably created the conditions that led to ineffective decision-making. If senior military leaders had participated in deliberations over Afghanistan policy, they might have assisted their political masters in developing a better (meaning, at a minimum, a politically more modest) strategy. In the first half of the Brezhnev era, the Soviet military establishment had close coordination with their civilian counterparts. During the second half, compartmentalization so limited discourse among stakeholder organizations that military officials in both Moscow and Afghanistan could not possibly know what their political leaders were doing, or what they expected of them beyond achieving operational success.

Senior military leaders tried to talk sense to political leaders before the Afghan invasion.<sup>416</sup> In April 1979, Marshal Ogarkov advised against a Politburo proposal to send Soviet helicopter pilots to Afghanistan. He continued to be vocal in his opposition with Ustinov until he was told to shut up. The eventual Commander of Ground Forces in Afghanistan, General Pavlovsky, opposed a Politburo request for a brigade of Airborne Forces to be sent to Afghanistan in August of that same year.<sup>417</sup> Their political masters ignored this and other advice. Over time, this treatment rendered moot potentially valuable military contributions to a policy-and-strategy debate about an Afghan invasion. The military leadership strongly felt that the real mistake was in diverting resources and attention to Afghanistan and away from what they believed was the most exigent threat to Soviet security (which was U.S. technological capability and superiority). This study does not suggest that by invading Afghanistan the Politburo stabbed military leaders in the back, acting in spite of their recommendations. Rather, the political leaders viewed the military as a faithful instrument of the state. They expected the armed forces to succeed quickly and decisively, and when they did not, the disappointment and

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<sup>416</sup> Harry Gelman, *Gorbachev's First Five Years in the Soviet Leadership*, 85. Also mentioned in William E. Odom, "The Militarization of Soviet Society," *Problems of Communism*, Vol. 25, September-October 1976, 34–51.

<sup>417</sup> Taylor, 204–205.

disaffection of the political leadership translated into a diminishment of the armed forces' standing in the state and, eventually, in society.

Soon after the intervention began, in the summer of 1980, most senior military leaders, including Ogarkov, Akhromeev and the field commanders on the ground, still could not imagine a military solution for the unfolding situation in Afghanistan. In Moscow, Sokolov (deputy chief of general staff) agreed with field commanders, but the Politburo was unwilling to consider withdrawing so soon.

While the war continued through the bureaucratic stasis of Gorbachev's first year in power, his central policies began to aggravate the military. In particular, glasnost and perestroika caused them tremendous concern. These bold policies brought economic and social turmoil, which diminished the military's vaunted position in both politics and society.<sup>418</sup> When the veil of secrecy surrounding the Afghan war was lifted, the military establishment endured harsh public scrutiny, which contributed to an environment of national unrest. The failure of senior Party officials and the military establishment to work together to consider first, the viability of intervention, and second, the potential for success in the first two years of the war, doomed them to a prolonged and disastrous war.<sup>419</sup> Closer consultation might have either prevented an invasion altogether or, at the very least, led to a quicker withdrawal. The military objection to going into Afghanistan in December 1979 was not that it was impossible to succeed there, but that it was a distraction from the need to prepare for war on the plains of Europe and to counter the U.S. technological challenge.

A positive connection between the Politburo and the generals, which might have lent confidence and commitment to a common outlook, never developed during the war. Gorbachev's attitude toward the military best illustrates the tension that had developed. The General Secretary's commentary from a November 1986 Politburo meeting had an acerbic tone. He did not try to conceal his disgust with the military. Gorbachev pointedly explained that it was the Politburo's responsibility to let the military know what a terrible

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<sup>418</sup> Reese, 182.

<sup>419</sup> Rice, "The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority" 80.

job they had done over the previous six years.<sup>420</sup> His disdain also reflected a lack of reverence for the military as an institution. He was the first Soviet political leader to have not experienced the Second World War as an adult. Early in his tenure as General Secretary, Gorbachev made clear that he was not beholden to the military establishment, which had gained and enjoyed considerable influence from their success in that monumental conflict.<sup>421</sup>

In effect, the main strategic guidance from political leaders involved exhortations to the field generals to try harder. Although the only positive military gains occurred when they applied maximum force (which was what “trying harder” meant from the military’s perspective), the military leadership never believed what they were doing was enough to succeed. Senior military leaders believed that the self-imposed constraint on troop levels precluded any real chance to succeed. However, the Soviet military establishment never formally advocated or agitated for increased troop levels, precisely because they, too, saw it as an unwanted distraction. The true military failure was in their not agitating for what they needed to accomplish the mission successfully, or, alternatively, for not clearly insisting that, given the resources available, the war should have been abandoned regardless of the consequences. The new image of the military became that of instrumental enablers to bad policy decisions.

The cycles of civil-military amity and tension, which began under Stalin and continued through Gorbachev’s tenure, provide insights into the Soviets’ handling of the invasion, occupation, and withdrawal from Afghanistan. One of the reasons the rift in civil-military relations re-emerged in the 1980s was because the military establishment failed to adjust to fiscal realities once defense spending began to stagnate. Senior military officials continued to demand more resources, even though the economy was not growing, and increasing investment was no longer possible without endangering the economic well-being of the rest of the society.

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<sup>420</sup> Politburo CPSU Meeting, 13 November 1986, Hoover Archives, MALSE, ESOC, file 89–14–41, fond 89, reel 1.993, Opisi (finding aides) 14, File 41.

<sup>421</sup> Parrott, 78.

Brezhnev, Andropov, Cherenkov, and Gorbachev all tried to explain why years of unchecked military investment could no longer continue. But instead of accepting this painful reality, senior military officials believed they were exempt from the struggles of Soviet society and took their displeasure to the court of Soviet public opinion (Ogarkov, in particular). In turn, they were marginalized and excluded from the most meaningful discussions about developing security policy, which was very damaging when it came time to consider intervention in Afghanistan. Once the war started, the political ends became a moving target. The military meanwhile controlled the tactical and operational conduct of the war in Afghanistan, but it did not conform to any well defined or coherent political strategy that would indicate when the ends had been achieved. Instead, the guidance was to “try harder” and the objective seemed to be to “get things under control.”

## **2. Rapid Succession of National Leadership**

Although the revolving door of General Secretaries contributed to the deficiencies of Soviet Afghan policy, it was the repeated failure of each General Secretary to act more decisively that led to failure. The original political plan specified only that the Soviets move quickly to replace the Afghan leadership, swiftly stabilize the situation, and then depart. There was no contingency strategy if the situation could not be stabilized. Each General Secretary pressed forward with the hope that the war would not continue much longer, and so they would “give it a little more time.” None was prepared to begin his tenure by abandoning a war that his predecessors had supported, even though such a moment of transition might appear well suited to a major change in policy. Three straight years of succession struggles only heightened the turbulence of Soviet politics, and with it the risk of appearing weak, defeatist, or in any way anti-military. Repeated leadership changes made it harder to improve on the prevailing strategic guidance of “try harder” and “get things under control.” Andropov did nominally pursue a diplomatic solution to end the war, but the next General Secretary, Chernenko, then pushed the nation towards a more offensive approach. By the time Gorbachev became General Secretary, he had to deal with the rage of the Afghan people and the outrage of the international community. After the deaths of Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko, Gorbachev was more focused on consolidating power than on making progress toward resolving the Afghan war

through diplomatic means. The mission in Afghanistan continued for another three years, though it had already failed by 1986. The philosophy of “give it a little more time” had been passed on from one General Secretary to the next. The war finally ended at the direction of a General Secretary who had opposed it from the outset and who also, crucially, held office long enough to exercise strong leadership under great bureaucratic pressure. He did this while ignoring a persistent chorus of concerns from the old guard that the Soviet Union’s international reputation would suffer irrevocably as a result.<sup>422</sup>

### **3. Preservation of International Prestige**

Soviet prestige was indeed at stake as the Politburo considered withdrawal.<sup>423</sup> As leader of the communist world, the Soviet Union could not abandon a floundering, fledgling communist nation. To do so would give the impression that the Soviet Union would not stand by friends when things got difficult. Concerns and arguments about preserving Soviet prestige repeatedly sidetracked purposeful efforts to establish a timeline for withdrawal and, when an exit date was agreed to in principle by the Politburo, prevented timely implementation. Meanwhile, the hard line of the United States also impeded the withdrawal. The Reagan Administration intended to make the Soviets’ life in Afghanistan as miserable as possible, and he wanted to make them pay dearly in terms of world opinion when they finally did leave. The West was able to do both precisely because the stakes were always low for the United States. They never committed troops to the war and the circuitous method by which resources were funneled through Pakistan to the Afghan resistance allowed them to retain plausible deniability.

By the time Gorbachev directed a withdrawal, the Soviets faced a loss of prestige whether they remained or withdrew. After the first year in Afghanistan, diplomatic meetings with concerned nations could have helped soothe the concerns of communist bloc nations. The Soviets could have claimed that they had done all they could for Afghanistan, but were adhering to their original intentions expressed to the international community, that is, they would support the change in leadership and then depart. Further,

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<sup>422</sup> Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 379.

<sup>423</sup> This was a major theme in Artemy Kalinovsky’s book *A Long Goodbye*.



a more complete political commitment would have meant increasing troop levels and perhaps pursuing the fighting further into western Pakistan; neither of these options was seriously considered by the Politburo. They were nevertheless fervently hoping for a turnaround without making a full political commitment or changing much of anything. This approach was folly. An early reassessment should have arisen from their recognition that the value of the object in Afghanistan was less than that of other domestic policy interests.<sup>424</sup>

Such a reassessment emerged only with Gorbachev. But he was intent on consolidating his power base before ordering a withdrawal. In the Soviet Union, the political reality was that ending even an unwanted war took considerable time. Despite his own personal commitment to immediate withdrawal, Gorbachev was reminded by orthodox communists that Soviet prestige in the Third World would suffer if they withdrew too quickly. In Afghanistan, Soviet leaders found themselves in a trap. The longer the campaign went on, the more heavily Moscow became invested in it, and the harder it became to envision an exit that would avoid grave consequences at home and abroad.

## **F. WHY THEY TOOK SO LONG TO WITHDRAW**

As early as January 1980, the Politburo considered the possibility of withdrawing troops. One reason it was unable to act on that early premonition of failure was that the vision of what they wanted to accomplish before they withdrew continued to change, so as to cast doubt on whether earlier apprehensions were still relevant. The Troika did not show the same type of acumen and energy in establishing achievable objectives and a clear exit strategy as they did in influencing Brezhnev to approve the invasion. Despite the initial lack of clarity, they believed they could achieve success (however they may have defined it), and that hope soon became entrenched. In the months following the invasion, when the Troika considered an early withdrawal, Gromyko spoke fervently against it, declaring that the Soviet Union must make Afghanistan completely secure.

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<sup>424</sup> Nichols, 107.

Brezhnev never intended to make Afghanistan completely secure, yet Soviet objectives evolved in the eyes of the Politburo as conditions changed.

The orthodox communists had blocked all Afghan withdrawal initiatives until Gorbachev came to power and then considerably slowed his efforts once he announced the intention to withdraw. After securing the Politburo's support to work toward a withdrawal in October 1985, Gorbachev continued to move cautiously. As the General Secretary he was much stronger in his words than in his deeds. His advisers included new political thinkers, who helped him marshal arguments to convince the orthodox communists that withdrawal was essential. Still, he displayed excessive caution in acknowledging the failure of the Soviet mission, which dogged him right up until he unilaterally announced that troops would be withdrawn.<sup>425</sup> When the withdrawal decision was finally announced to the world, there was little of the feared blowback. Under the auspices of a United Nations-mediated resolution, the withdrawal was later seen as one of Gorbachev's most popular policy decisions.<sup>426</sup>

For his part, Gorbachev believed that poor Afghan leadership in Kabul had the most significant, negative impact on the timeline for withdrawal. However, a leader stronger than Karmal probably would have only improved the Soviet lot marginally and certainly not enough to change the outcome. Indeed, every Afghan leader before Karmal had struggled to maintain control of Afghanistan, and Najibullah after him continued to struggle until leaders of the former resistance executed him (in 1996). The Soviets, including Gorbachev, wanted a friendly regime in Afghanistan---the basic point of the whole war---but they could not find an Afghan leader who could make the regime both friendly and stable.

This study in Soviet decision-making details the substantial hazards of the Soviet intervention in a country they did not understand well. The initial decision to go to war was confined to a handful of political leaders. Then fear of losing prestige, failure to

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<sup>425</sup> Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 80.

<sup>426</sup> Khan, 295.

coordinate decisions with the military, and years of disruptive successions cut against the development of an effective strategy. In addition, a severely strained civil-military relationship made the war a politically poisonous issue. It was up to a new leader, Gorbachev, to forge a path and build his own political capital before the Soviets could successfully withdraw. The military continued their futile tactical and operational efforts on the ground while they were increasingly marginalized in the Kremlin.<sup>427</sup> Shortly after the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan, Gorbachev directed dramatic reductions in both military forces and arms spending. The Soviet military had become a casualty of the General Secretary's reform agenda. Meanwhile, he and his Politburo colleagues had become casualties as well. Though the exit from Afghanistan was a popular decision, they had all lost the prestige among their own people---the cloak that had shielded them from public criticism from the days of Stalin---shortly after the withdrawal.

The Soviets allowed themselves to become bogged down in Afghanistan and only withdrew their troops after nearly a decade of struggles and irreparable damage to their international reputation. After the Soviets retreated, both superpowers (USSR and U.S.) lost interest in what had been such a hot spot in the final act of the Cold War. The situation in Afghanistan was then certainly worse than before the Soviet Union invaded.<sup>428</sup> The historical pattern of foreign invasion in Afghanistan suggested that the Soviet intervention would enjoy initial success, until some contrary unifying force (in this case Islam) developed momentum and consolidated support against the invaders. The Soviet invasion achieved that rare set of circumstances in the history of Afghanistan: a unified political and even moral purpose that transcended Afghan tribal, ethnic and geographic lines. The purpose was to repel the Soviets.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Statement made by Aleksandr Yakovlev who presided over the Foreign Policy Commission of the Central Committee, Savranskaya and Blanton, ed., "Afghanistan and the Soviet Withdrawal 20 Years Later," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 272, found online at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272>, accessed on 7 May, 2010, page 1 of 3.

<sup>429</sup> Tanner, 243.

Since the Soviet withdrawal, there have been a number of rounds of fighting in Afghanistan, which subsequently became the primary training and staging base for international terrorist networks. The Soviet struggle to withdraw without inflicting further long-term damage is a cautionary tale. In 1980, the Soviets initially and momentarily believed, as had so many previous invaders of Afghanistan, that their intervention would end well. They were sadly mistaken.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Holt, 46.

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## **APPENDIX A. NOTES ON SOURCES**

MALSE documents have not been published, or fully translated, into English. Their Russian-language originals surfaced during the 1992 trial of the Communist Party. The Hoover Institution concluded an agreement with the State Archival Service of the Russian Federation (Rosarkhiv) in April 1992. The agreement specified that the Hoover Institution would microfilm the records and finding aides (which help with context-tracing among other things) of the Communist Party of the former Soviet Union, as well as other State Archives holdings. When fully translated, the result will be a unique set of English-language source documents that accurately capture the Soviet Politburo's own accounts and deliberations on the issue of Afghanistan. Full original documents were used in context in order to provide a better understanding, proper interpretation, and verified source for this subject matter. They were intended to provide a trace and analysis of the events of the invasion, occupation, and withdrawal over time.

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## **APPENDIX B. SOVIET STAKEHOLDER AGENCIES**

### **The Communist Party (CPSU)**

The civil authority that maintained control over the Soviet military was the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). It must be remembered that the CPSU's political leadership refers to the broader membership of the CPSU, including the vast majority of Soviet military officers. The Soviet military officers and senior leadership within the CPSU had a personal stake in the Party itself, including every flag officer within the military establishment. It was clearly a master stroke after the Revolution to make the Red Army leadership beholden to the Communist Party, in order to preclude any challenge to the governing power.

It is difficult for a student of classical military structures to understand the role of the CPSU in military affairs. It was the CPSU organizations, established within the military services, which became the most militant of the Party detachments. In fact, the activities of these detachments were guided directly by both the Central Committee's codified programs and rules among the Party's most militant detachments. A close look at the regular interaction between Party and military organization reveals that any interference from the political arm with respect to military doctrine was seen as unnecessary involvement from agents with little understanding of military activities. Even when considering that the majority of Soviet troops were Party members, it is easy to see where tensions could arise when the informed professional opinion of military commanders met the Party interpretation of political commissars.<sup>431</sup>

### **The Defense Council**

The Defense Council was intended to serve as the main forum for all civil-military interaction, but in reality the purpose changed from one CPSU Chairman to the next, often directly reflecting his own preferences for controlling the military. This control shifted from leader to leader and the approach adopted was often significantly different. The Council was the only body that had the power to coordinate the operational

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<sup>431</sup> Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the USSR* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 293.



activities of all military and internal security forces.<sup>432</sup> In formal terms the Council had several major functions, but the most significant concerned the adoption and the technical development and allocation of all major military programs.<sup>433</sup> In the era of détente that began with Brezhnev and waned in the Years of Succession, the Council was involved in the arms reduction debates and internal program reduction discussions, and during the budget crises that erupted under Gorbachev, it was at the center of efforts to convert military production facilities to civilian uses. As a second function, the council also served as the Soviets' strategic evaluative arm for the implementation of arms control decisions. Third, the Defense Council oversaw the internal organization and deployment of the armed forces, which was supposed to include matters of mobilization readiness planning, conscription and manpower policy.<sup>434</sup> Finally, the Council was intended to serve as the final word on the development of Soviet strategy and doctrine. It rarely worked out that way.

It is worth mentioning that this civilian-run Defense Council was distinguished by a dearth of civilian expertise at the staff level where the formation of policy options occurred. Theorists have referred to the separation of military expertise from civilian leadership as “institutional loose coupling” and in effect it amounted to a split in technical understanding along civilian and military lines.<sup>435</sup> This contributed to civil-military tensions over time but also to the professional frustration of civilian officials who were charged with carrying out arms control negotiations with countries like the United States. In such cases the knowledge of diplomatic officials about the weapons systems they were discussing was dramatically limited.

### **The Main Political Administration (MPA)**

As with all primary arms of the CPSU, the Main Political Administration was accountable to the Central Committee for all of its activities and served as the channel

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<sup>432</sup> Victor Yasman, “The Internal Security Situation in the USSR and the Defense Council,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Report on the USSR, 398/89, September, 1, 1989, 9.

<sup>433</sup> Gelman, *Gorbachev and the Future of the Soviet Military Institution*, 16

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Rice, “The Party, the Military, and Decision Authority” 65.

through which the Party influenced the management of the military establishment. The terms of reference for the MPA included the life and activity of military forces, the enhancement of their combat readiness, strengthening their focus on discipline, increasing the commitment to the Party and, in the process, apparently boosting their morale. The charter of the Main Political Administration was to report to the CPSU on the overall state of Armed Forces readiness.<sup>436</sup>

The Main Political Administration was formed in 1946 following the triumphant defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. It was formed as an appendage to the organization that came to be known as the Ministry of Defense. The MPA was intended to work as a subordinate department of the Central Committee responsible for directing and controlling questions of Party-political import in each of the military services. Further political administrations were created for each one of the military services in order to feed information to and propagate policy from the MPA. This organizational structure also held true for regional and functional commands as well.<sup>437</sup> The military commissar was the action agent at each level of and within every command that provided feedback on adherence to the tenets of political and Party theory up through the headquarters of the MPA.

### **The General Staff**

The Red Army staff was officially renamed the General Staff in the years just before Stalin's brutal reordering of military leadership prior to the Second World War. In doing so, he also expanded its function to strengthen the role of components of the central staff on issues of military policy. In 1935, military professionals had no institutional competition in matters of military science.<sup>438</sup> The Soviet General Staff was not intended to serve as simply a planning staff, but as a command staff as well. The Stalinist defense reforms of 1935 created directorates for mobilization, intelligence, communications, military doctrine and operations. This substantial reorganization demanded that there be

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<sup>436</sup> Scott and Scott, 288.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>438</sup> Rice, 58.

an integrating function to create a unified strategic view. The General Staff provided this unified approach and in the process assumed the dominant Party role in the development of defense strategy. The intention was for each of the Service staffs to develop operational art and tactics to correspond with their technical capabilities, while the General Staff would review the Services' proposed refinements and make certain that any and all changes reflected the CPSU's intended strategic direction.<sup>439</sup>

### **The Committee for State Security (KGB)**

It has been asserted that control of personnel is the key to Party dominance in military matters. The creation of the Committee for State Security (KGB) was intended to maintain a close watch on the critical cogs in the CPSU wheels and provided the source of that control not only internally but externally as well. The KGB was originally intended to serve as a counterweight to the military and a mechanism to prevent the development of any plots of military takeover. This served as a powerful reinforcing measure to the commitment of high-ranking officers as high-ranking communists with a personal stake in the success of the system.<sup>440</sup>

The CPSU also had specific controls over each of the military services in the form of the KGB's Armed Forces Counterintelligence Directorate. KGB agents from this directorate were distributed throughout the Ministry of Defense and even within other security services like the Ministry of Internal Security and the Border Guards. The mechanism to ensure Party compliance among officers and enlisted troops was a complex informant network. KGB agents assigned down to the lowest level in the military services reported up through their own chain of command on issues of Party compliance and problem areas. Any evidence of ideological deviation was swiftly reported and acted upon.<sup>441</sup> The influence of the KGB in matters of political intelligence was pervasive and,

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>441</sup> Scott and Scott, 277.

given the clever structuring of the informant system, even capable of providing a source for intelligence about the military itself.<sup>442</sup>

At first glance, the relationship between the CPSU and the KGB appears to have a great deal in common with the relationship between the CPSU and the military establishment. In both cases the Party leadership had to take measures to control what Amy Knight refers to as a ‘coercive elite’ in her work entitled “The KGB and Civil-Military Relations.” The KGB was, like the military, a powerful and often secretive group of officers with strong traditions. The military and the KGB both enjoyed special status within the state system, and both controlled armed units and resources that could quite easily mount a threat to the political leadership. In fact, the KGB had a track record of becoming involved in power politics. For example, in 1964, the KGB was a key player in the overthrow of the unpopular and unpredictable Nikita Khrushchev. It is also true that the KGB and Soviet military both operated with a great deal more autonomy than any other agencies in the Party system.<sup>443</sup> There is no question that many of the same fundamental issues of Party-Military relations apply to the Party-KGB relationship, but it must also be remembered that the KGB’s mission and skills were quite distinct from those of the military establishment and their budget needs were not nearly as great either.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Rice 74.

<sup>443</sup> Amy Knight, “The KGB and Civil-Military Relations,” in *Soldiers and the Soviet State*, Colton and Gustafson, 94.

<sup>444</sup> Knight, 93.

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